A Witch's Guide to a Good Brew

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A Witch’s Guide to a Good Brew, Volume 1

By Jose Rodriguez-Copeland

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Dedication

This book could not have been possible without the love and support of my friends and family.

To my parents, who supported my creativity ever since I was born and continue to this day.

To my girlfriend and beta-reader Katherine, who supports my wild writing ideas.

To my friends. I am a product of our interactions. The time we share feeds my creative drive.

And to you, readers. Sharing a story with you all is a dream come true.

Also by Jose Rodriguez-Copeland

Flame Over Empire Volume 1 (Out Now)
Flame Over Empire Volume 2 (Coming Soon)

“He had no greater joy than that, which was to sit some hours at the coffee-house, listening to the various conversations, analyzing different minds and characters.”

G. Gozzi, Memorie Intuiti, ca.1770.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Epilogue
Author Notes

Chapter 1

I held Mr. Johnson hostage with a cup of espresso. He stood across from me at the bar, his brawny fingers holding a cup far tinier than one he was used to. I poured him a single shot of espresso mixed with sugar.

“It doesn’t have any milk?” he said.

“No milk. Just sugar and the coffee.”

“Then what’s the foam on top?” he said, referring to the light brown scum on top of the darker espresso beneath it.

“That’s froth from the espresso,” I said.

Mr. Johnson drank one sip, then downed the rest. I waited for the middle-aged man to jump up from his stool. He would then call out to the Heavens for having made him wait so long to taste a cup as good as the one I made him.

He did no such thing. Instead, Mr. Johnson made a disgusted face and put the cup down on its saucer, a loud *clank* reverberating across the otherwise empty coffeehouse.

“Not for me,” he said. Mr. Johnson looked at his watch. “Gotta jet. Get me the usual?”

I took his balled-up bills and poured him filtered coffee in one of our custom cups.

“There’s a reason I come here instead of Starbucks,” he said.

“Is it the service?” I said.

“No. This coffee is effin’ amazing. What is it?”

“Oh, it’s really interesting, it’s—“

“Oops, gotta leave. Work, man,” he said.

“—Puerto Rican” I said.

The man answered his phone on the way out the door. The last thing to leave out the rectangular opening was the orange cup of coffee. Plastered in the middle of the orange recycled paper fiber cup was a black cauldron.

With that, I was alone in the café. Fine by me.

Nestled in a busy street right outside of Atlanta, the Twisted Cauldron was my true home. I had only been an employee for two years, but I lost track of the thousands of times I had scrubbed its eight mahogany tables and vacuumed between the booth cushions.

What we lacked in theatrics, we made up for with good-tasting coffee.

“Mornin’, Raul,” said Elise as she walked in. At twenty-one years old, Elise was three years my junior but no less capable. For all intents and purposes, she formed the other member of the ‘we’ I mentioned.

Elise put on her bright orange apron and went to work refilling baked items from out back. I washed the cup that hosted Mr. Johnson’s underappreciated espresso, wiping the ends until I could see my face glisten off it.

The bell behind the door clanged, followed by the entrance of an elderly couple. I put the rag away and went to face them.

“Good morning,” I said to Don and Julie Mortimer. “What’ll you have today?”

“The usual, my boy,” said Don, his left hand rooted firmly on a wooden cane. With a slow motion, he lifted the cane and pointed it at the baked goods display.

“And one of those chocolate croissants,” he added.

“Coming right up,” I said.

A few seconds later, I put two piping orange cups and an equally hot croissant between his fingers. He brought the coffee up to his pruned nose and soaked in the smell.

“Now this is good stuff,” he said.

“Careful Don,” I said, “or you might get addicted. Then you’ll go broke giving the Twisted Cauldron all your pension.”

“As if he doesn’t already do that,” said Julie, laughing.

“Good morning,” said Elise as she shuffled out of the back room with a box of pastries. She let it down on a table behind the counter, making the legs buckle from the weight.

“Those are some heavy boxes,” said Don. “What’s in ‘em?”

“New merchandise,” I said. “We’re introducing a new line of organic sandwiches.”

“Having trouble bringing in more young people? Isn’t free wifi enough?” said Don.

“That’s what I said!” said Elise.

“Not anymore Don,” I said.

“The poetry slam didn’t work last month? Or the chess tournament before that? Why don’t you just let a café be a café.”

“I need to find something,” I said. “I owe it all to Joe.”

“That uncle of yours still on the road? Mighty irresponsible to leave his nephew to cover his lazy ass” said Don.

“Last I heard he settled in Maryland. And it’s no trouble, really. I have fun working at Twisted Cauldron.”

There was no question that I enjoyed managing the café. The customers were great and the coffee bean smell never failed to bring a smile to my face.

It was also very taxing. The Twisted Cauldron only had two full-time employees, and I could count on one hand how many days off I gave myself in the last year and a half. Elise pestered me about taking more days off, and I knew she was right. Maybe when I found someone else to help me out. For now, however, the Twisted Cauldron was a lean enterprise, meaning that I can barely afford to pay Elise and give myself a salary.

The old couple retreated to a seat in the corner of the coffeehouse. Smooth jazz played through the speakers, leading Don to tap his moccasins on the hardwood. It relaxed me a little, too. An added benefit of being the manager: getting to choose the playlist.

A short lull was followed by the arrival of a new customer. The first thing that poked through the door was not a human, but a hat. It was a black wide-brimmed hat with a light purple streak, like the kind you would find at a store in the weeks leading up to Halloween.

Wearing the hat was a woman with big round eyes that looked like they could suck in anything she pointed them to. She shuffled inside and stopped, jumping in surprise when the door closed behind her.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hi!”

She walked to the counter, the tip of her hat bobbing with every step. It was really amusing from my perspective.

“Are you Raul Backard?”

“Yeah, I am,” I replied.

“Oh, good! I’m in the right place. Let’s see…”

She pulled out a piece of paper and handed it to me. It was a piece of papyrus written in the finest cursive I had ever seen.

“Hello Raul,” I said, reading aloud. “Please give Tessa a job at the Twisted Cauldron. Yours truly, Uncle Joe.”

I read it in silence a second time. It made me even more confused.

“Are you Tessa?” I said.

“That’s right,” said the girl. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Excuse me a second,” I said as I pulled out my phone and dialed. A groggy voice answered on the other line.

“Hey boy, how are you?” said my uncle.

“I got an interesting letter today…”

“About that…”

“Why did you tell me to give this girl a job? You know we barely have any money as is,” I said.

“I’m sure you can make it work,” he said. I can’t say I didn’t see it coming. Uncle Joe was never one to make logical, business-conscious decisions. But still, why hire Tessa specifically?

“Is there any reason why you’re asking me to hire Tessa? Is she, like, super qualified or something?”

“Nothing like that,” said Joe, laughing. “In fact I’d even say she’s probably one of the least qualified people on the planet. Hiring her is a favor that I owe someone. I’m going to hang up now.”

Tessa stared at me, her smile and eyes unflinching. There’s nothing to do about it.

“Do you have experience working in a coffee shop? Or restaurant?”

“I don’t,” she said.

“Any skills you’d like to tell me about?”

“I'm a pretty good… Wait, I can’t share that. Sorry.”

Tessa wasn’t making this easy on me.

“How old are you?”

“I can answer that one,” said Tessa. Her eyes twinkled. She slammed her hands on the counter and put her face close to mine. “I’m twenty-two!”

“That’s good,” I said, prying my face away from hers. At least she is old enough to work.

“Have you ever made a cup of coffee before?” I said.

“Never!” she said, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. “Never tasted it either?”

“You what?!” I said. I turned around and put fresh coffee grounds in the shiny espresso machine. Tessa watched as I weaves my hands behind the counter. Two minutes later and I handed her a cup.

It was an espresso mixed with chocolate powder and warm milk. I topped it off with a dash of whipped cream and handed it to Tessa.

She took it in her hands and sipped.

“Well?” I said. “How is it?” The mocha is, without a doubt, the supreme form of the espresso. I could go on about how the chocolate complements it so well, but I’ll leave that for another time.

“It’s too bitter,” said Tessa, putting the cup down and pushing it as far away from her as she could. I was dumbstruck.

“Too bitter? The chocolate… the whipped cream… It’s all sugar!”

“Needs more,” she said.

“I think I need some time to think…” I said, dragging the half-finished mocha to the sink. I went over to Elise, who was busy attending to a customer.

“Uncle Joe asked me to hire her,” I said, pointing to Tessa. “She doesn’t know anything about coffee, so we’ll hold off on that for now. Can you teach her about handling inventory? I’ll handle things up here.”

“Sure thing, boss,” she said, raising her hand in salute. Elise approached the new employee and dragged her to the storage room, leaving me to handle the trickle of new customers.

Tessa had to be an extraterrestrial. No way would someone other than an alien think that a mocha wasn’t sweet enough.

Regardless, her arrival did change my future plans. I could pay Tessa without decreasing Elise and myself’s already meager salary, but at the expense of Twisted Cauldron’s “growth fund”. It was the name I gave to a pool of funds from the profit that I would use for things I thought would take the café in a new direction. It included activities like author signings and investments in ‘exploratory’ ingredients.

I was being too negative. Tessa might not seem like the most capable employee now, but she might grow into one. Having her around might encourage me to take more days off.

The rest of the morning rush resembled every other. I attended to the customers while keeping a close eye on Tessa. Our new employee struggled to carry the boxes of pastries that Elise could sling one-handed, and twice she almost tripped me while I prepared a customer’s drink.

“I’m sorry!” she repeated after one incident that forced me to brew a new cup of coffee.

“It’s OK,” I said. “Don’t worry about it. It’s your first day. Anyone would be nervous.”

“Never thought it would be this hard,” said Tessa.

“What? Working at a café?”

“No. Working in general,” she said, gathering the bags of scattered sandwiches on the floor. The marginal cost of a cup of coffee is a few cents, so losing that is no issue. Losing a sandwich on the other hand… I would rather not think about it.

I offered Tessa a smile and told her everything would work out. The girl returned a smile of her own. She pulled on the brim of her hat and returned to work. For the next two hours, she executed whatever task Elise had for her to do. No spills or tears necessary.

It was 1:30PM before I knew it. Elise took her break an hour ago, meaning that Tessa and myself were free to take ours. I found myself wanting to spend that time getting to know her. Tessa had been working at the Twisted Cauldron for a little over four hours, and it occurred to me that I didn’t know the first thing about her. More than anything, I wanted to find out why my uncle was so keen to give her employment.

“Elise, can you take over?” I said, taking off my apron.

“No problem,” she said, taking my position behind the register. Tessa wasn’t anywhere in the open, meaning that she was stuck doing something in the back room. I hung my apron by the door and turned the knob to go in.

I held my breath. Tessa stood with her back facing me. Coffee beans floated around her, each bean covered in a white hue. One by one the beans marched into the open container in her hands, as if orchestrated by some invisible puppetmaster. As if the objects had a life of their own.

“What’s going on?” I said.

“Raul!” said Tessa. As she turned to face me, the dozens of floating beans fell to the ground, each producing a barely audible *plitter* as they hit the hardwood.

“It’s not what you think, Raul!”

“The coffee was… floating, wasn’t it?” I said. My mind wasn’t playing tricks on me. I’ve never done acid or any hard drug, but I feel like the sight was more potent than any drug. Coffee beans moving on their own… could there be a rational explanation?”

“Let me explain, please,” said Tessa. Her face was red. Tears welled around her eyes.

“I have to go,” I said. Go anywhere but here.

“You can’t,” said Tessa. The door slammed shut behind me.

“Did you do that?” I said.

“I did,” said Tessa. “Raul, I’m about to tell you something but you have to promise not to tell anyone.”

“What are you saying?”

“Promise me, Raul!” The girl had a tight grip on my right hand. I got a sinking feeling that I couldn’t leave even if I wanted to.

“I promise, Tessa. I promise.” My heart beat so fast it threatened to burst out of my chest. The world around me faded, leaving only Tessa and myself. Her big eyes pleaded with me.

“I’m… a witch,” she said.

“A witch? Like, the I-can-do-magic kind?” I said.

“That’s the only kind,” she said.

“Doesn’t m-matter to me,” I said. “We don’t discriminate here at the Twisted Cauldron. haha…”

That was by far the worst joke I had ever made. The punchline gets a D+, while the timing gets an F-. Try again the next time you uncover more earth-shattering news, Raul.

“You don’t have to be so nervous,” said Tessa. “I just tripped and spilled the beans all over the floor. Didn’t want you to get mad at me so I tried to fix it as quickly as I could.” She pulled on the brim of her hat and used it to cover her face.

“I’m such an idiot,” she said.

“You’re not.”

“You can’t tell anyone about this, Raul. Please.”

“I won’t… but I have a feeling he already knows.”

I dialed my uncle. He often had bizarre requests, like serving a person wearing a yellow hat a cappuccino at 3:23PM, or put a rubber chicken in the table closest to the door. This blew all of that out of the water.

“Hey, uncle,” I said in a sarcastic tone. “How’s everything? Did you maybe forget to mention that Tessa’s a witch?”

“You already found out about that?” he said. “Only took you a few hours, huh. Maybe you’re not so stupid after all.”

“As blunt as ever,” I said.

“I assume Tessa is there with you. Put me on speaker.”

I did as he asked me to. Tessa and I were so close we were butting heads.

“Hi Mr. Joe,” said Tessa.

“Hi girl. How’s my good-for-nothin’ nephew been treating you?”

“He’s been nothing but pleasant,” she said.

“Good. Let me get to it, then. Tessa here is a witch. All her life she’s lived in a witch colony in Maryland. The Council thinks that it’s important that she gets to experience the rest of the world. That brings me to my next request: help Tessa acclimate to life among us non-magic folk. I can’t stress how important it is.”

I had so many questions. Why was my uncle in league with a witch colony? What the hell is a witch colony?

“I can do that,” I said. “But managing the business on top of that… you’re putting too much trust in me.”

“Forget about the business for a second, Raul. Helping Tessa acclimate is far more important.”

That comment shook me. How could that possibly be the case? I know Tessa had special circumstances, but not to this extent. There was something he wasn’t telling me.

“Why is that?”

“You ask too many questions,” he said. “Just help Tessa and make sure the business stays in the black. Got it?”

“Yeah…”

“Good.”

He hung up, leaving me to stare at Tessa. Her wavy brown locks ruffled in front of her face, tickling her nose.

“I hope I’m not imposing,” she said with a shy smile.

“You’re not,” I said. “C’mon, let’s go back. We can heat up sandwiches for lunch.”

We re-emerged to find Elise struggling under the weight of customer orders.

“What the hell were you guys doing?!”

“Sorry,” we both said, putting our aprons back on.

We closed our doors at 8PM and spent the next half-hour sweeping the floors and accounting for the money on the cash register.

"Thanks for all the help today," I said.

"It's my pleasure," said Tessa, wiping sweat off her brow.

I locked the front doors and made sure the security system was turned on.

"See you tomorrow then," I said.

"Um…"

"What is—oh right. You don't have a place. You can stay with me."

I had forgotten all about the arrangement. The alternative would be to pay a hotel stay for her or leave her out on the street.

"I can!? I mean, you wouldn't mind, right?"

The girl's smile could melt even the most rigid of stone hearts. Were all witches this cute?

"Of course," I said. "Fair warning, though. It's not very glamorous."

"Anything is fine!"

My apartment was eight blocks away from Twisted Cauldron. We transitioned from the ritzy merchant streets to the half-dilapidated apartment complexes. A nightclub sat across the street from my apartment, its line extending into the sidewalk.

"You live in the heart of the city? Must be very exciting," said Tessa with a starry-eyed expression.

"Not really," I said. "I don't go out much."

"Hmm… we will have to change that," said Tessa.

"Why is that?" I said, going up the stairs. Each step reverberated in the cramped corridor.

"Because I wish to learn as much as I can about the city."

"I'll try my best," I said. "We can do something in the weekend."

"I would very much like that."

We stopped at the sixth floor.

"Welcome home," I said with a bow.

The smell of the fried omelette I made in the morning lingered inside my apartment. Past the kitchen counter was a sofa, its leather cushions several degrees past well-worn. Next to it was my bed and a heap of dirty laundry.

Most men would be nervous to welcome a guest without warning, but I didn't have anything to hide. I also didn't know what size of house

Tessa was accustomed to from her time in the Maryland witch colony.

Witch colony in Maryland. If you had asked me this morning whether I thought Magic was real, I would have replied with a flat “No.” But the proof was undeniable. Witches who could use magic lived, and they looked just like regular humans.

Tessa plopped her backpack on the kitchen counter and took out a family-sized chocolate bar.

“It’s not much, but it’s home,” I said. “Hope you don’t mind.”

“It’s amazing! So comfy and personal! Just like in those picture books I read about New York,” she said.

Children dream of witches. It only makes sense for witches to have picture books of exotic places, even New York.

“You could say that,” I said. “Only my rent is half the price.”

“May I take the sofa?” said Tessa.

“You can take the bed. I’ll take the sofa.”

“I couldn’t impose like that,” said Tessa. She positioned herself so that our faces were inches apart.

“I’m your guest.”

“That’s right,” I said. “And my job is to get you acclimated to life here, right? You need a bed for that.”

“Why would I need a bed for that?”

She got me there.

“You, uh… you have to believe me,” I said.

“Hmph. Very well then. I’ll make it up to you somehow.”

After exchanging a few pleasantries, Tessa retreated to the bathroom to change. She emerged wearing a matching purple pajama button-up and bottoms set, adorned with orange pumpkins.

“So witches and pumpkins are a thing?” I said, trying to peel my eyes away from her gettup.

“They are in some circles,” she said. “Plus they’re good conduits for when we’re doing the sacrificial rituals.”

“Sacrificial rituals? Just what are you sacrificing?” I said.

“You should’ve seen the look on your face,” said Tessa, erupting into a fit of laughter.

“Says the girl who fell down like six times today. Did the air trip you up? Must be a witch thing.”

“There’s so much for you to learn,” she said as she got under the bed covers. “Some of the things we can do can blow your mind.”

I wasn’t sure if she meant that literally or not. Best not to ask.

“Yeah, well wait until you hear about reality television. That would really blow your mind.”

I waited for a snappy retort, but one never came. I glanced over the sofa and found Tessa asleep. Her face looked at peace. We’ve known each other for less than a day and she has no problems falling asleep a few feet away. I turned off the lights and went to bed.

There was so much I wanted to learn about Tessa’s world. Did they have their own clothing retailers, or do they have some sort of secret contract with a company? Were broomsticks popular modes of transport? Why was she sent here?

The last question was the most important to me. I owed my uncle a lot, and even doing him a favor as big as this one wouldn’t be enough. That didn’t change the fact that I still knew nothing. How long would it take Tessa to acclimate to life outside her witch colony? Once that was complete, then what?

I tried to dispel those thoughts. Knowing my uncle, I wouldn’t be getting any answers soon. My best course of action was to help Tessa. Maybe I’ll find answers along the way.

Chapter 2

My alarm woke me up at 5AM. I rushed to shut it off, cautious not to wake up Tessa in the process. I looked over and saw that her eyes were shut, and her brown hair was spread out, as if some invisible force was determined to give her the worst hairstyle possible. All was well.

After changing, I turned the stove on and whisked some eggs. It occurred to me that I had no idea what kind of food Tessa would eat. She didn't protest when I handed her the meat sandwiches yesterday, so I at least know that she's not vegetarian. But still, for a girl who looks so excited with just about everything, she shared little with me. I would try to change that today.

At 6AM, I tried to wake her.

"Hello? Tessa? Hellooooooo?" I said.

"Mhm."

"Tessa? Breakfast's ready. We have to go soon."

No response.

I tried to shake her awake. My feet lifted off the ground.

"Wh-What's going on? Tessa?"

The same white hue that surrounded the coffee beans yesterday now surrounded me. When I levitated a foot off the ground, I was pushed back. The witch then dropped me in the kitchen, ten feet from where I started.

"I'll let you sleep a few more minutes, then," I said. The magic didn't hurt, but it felt bizarre not to be in control of my actions. Like a witch's puppet. I just hope there were no long-term side effects.

The witch, possibly lured by the smell, woke up ten minutes later. The first thing she did was grab the pointy hat at the foot of her bed and put it on. She navigated the room without opening her eyes, then plopped down on a seat in the kitchen counter.

"I'm hungry," she said, stretching her arms as far as they could go. "And tired."

"Sorry about that," I said. "Eggs and bacon good with you?"

"Yes, please," said Tessa. I put both plates down and sat next to her.

"Did you usually wake up early back home?"

“It depends on who was my mentor. Ever since I was 6, I would go through three months of training with a particular witch. The worst, Minerva, would make me wake up at four-thirty in the morning.”

“Sounds rough,” I said.

“Compared to that, working at the Twisted Cauldron is easy!” said Tessa, her mouth half-full with food.

“Then that just means I have to make you work harder. You haven’t even made coffee yet, after all.”

“Not funny,” she said. “I’ll do that today.”

We left the apartment shortly after. The crisp morning air was refreshing. Birds chirped on the trees lining the sidewalk. Life was sweet, but it was somehow sweeter with Tessa next to me.

“Before I forget,” I said. “I think it’s really cool that you can use magic, but…”

“Not in front of the customers, right?” said Tessa. “I understand. The witches’ code is very clear on that: no one outside of the witch colony should know about our existence.”

“It must be hard,” I said. “To live in secret.”

“It’s not the greatest,” she said, smoothing the edges of her skirt: “I’ll get an earful whenever the council finds out.”

Tessa helped me wipe the tables while I set up the machines. Our regulars ordered the same thing every morning, meaning that I made nearly the same thing every weekday during the first hour of business.

“What’s so great about coffee, anyway?” said Tessa. “If it were me, I would just order the sweets.”

“Learn how to serve a cup before you diss it,” I said. “Come here.”

I brought Tessa behind the counter. There, I pointed out the espresso machine. Its stainless steel body reflected our features. The top panel included two sets of buttons corresponding to the two spouts beneath it.

“Press the button with one cup for a single shot of espresso, and the two cup-button for two shots of espresso. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah,” said Tessa. She traced her finger through the panel, leaving a smudge behind. I tried not to let it phase me.

“Next is the steam,” I said, pointing out the boiler stem at either end. “You use this knob to heat up the milk.”

It took me five more minutes to finish explaining how the system works.

"And here's a quick guide on how to make all the drinks," I said, giving her a laminated book. It contained instructions on how to do nearly every possible drink a customer could want. "Try to make the drink on page 2."

She flipped to the page and looked at me with a deadpan expression.

"It just says 'doppio espresso: press the double espresso button'. Is this really what you want me to do?"

"If it's so simple then you'll have no trouble brewing it, right?"

I watched Tessa put the new coffee grounds in using the machine adjacent to the espresso maker. She put it in the espresso machine and pressed the required button. Out poured the liquid gold, topped with a light-brown frothy *crema*.

I took the cup in my hand and brought it to my mouth.

"Tastes good," I said.

"All I did was press was button," she said.

"And you did it perfectly. Now, moving on…"

I taught Tessa how to make the basic non-espresso drinks, like lattes, and espresso drinks, including a cappuccino, macchiato, and mocha. That last one she made by adding two more spoonfuls of chocolate powder then required by the recipe.

"What do you think?" she said.

"It's… sweet," I said.

She yanked the porcelain cup from my hand and took a gulp. Tessa made a disgusted face.

"This isn't very good," she said.

"Don't worry, we'll keep trying," I said. A customer walked in, derailing our plans.

It was Halley, a fitness nut and one of our regulars.

"Mornin' Raul," said the woman.

"Good morning," I said. "Halley, this is Tessa, our newest employee. She'll be taking your order this morning."

"I am?" said Tessa. I put my hand on her shoulder and shot her a thumbs-up, before retreating to the end of the counter. No training as good as the real thing, after all.

"W-what would you like to order today?" said Tessa.

Halley’s eyes fixed on Tessa’s hat.

“It’s a new wardrobe we’re trying out. You like it?” I said from my corner. I need to do whatever I can to make Tessa’s life easier.

“It’s cute,” she said. “I’d like a soy caramel latte with two pumps of caramel, please. But don’t go too hard on the soy. Not too little, not too much, OK?”

Tessa’s eyes spun. She tried to input the order details into the cash register, but her finger froze midair. I hadn’t taught her everything she needed to know about the payment processing system yet.

“I’ll handle the payment,” I said. “You work on preparing the latte.”

“OK,” said Tessa. My intervention did not reduce her anxiety. I saw her grabbing the soy milk carton with one hand and the caramel one with the other, without much of an idea where to start. Tessa realized that she needed to pour the coffee into it at some point too. She walked in a tight, concentric circles as she decided her next course of action.

“Tessa,” I said, taking a hold of the milk carton. “You can do this. Just read off the manual. There’s no rush.”

“R-right.”

Tessa pulled out the laminated book and followed the instructions to the tee. She was slow, but that was understandable. She handed Halley her drink in one of our to-go containers.

“Please come again,” said Tessa with a smile.

As soon as Halley left, Tessa found the nearest seat and slumped into it.

“That was stressful,” she said.

“It was your first time,” I said. “No one expects you to be perfect.”

“Except the customer does! If I could use magic I would’ve finished it in a few seconds.”

“Did you use magic for everything back in your home?”

“Cooking, cleaning, getting dressed… Almost everything,” said Tessa. “It might take me some time before I can do this properly.”

I caught sight of three customers walking past one window. They were regular customers who usually had easy orders.

“There’s more already?” she said, looking to the door just as the three came in. Tessa shot up.

“You’ll do fine,” I said. “I believe in you.”

As Tessa greeted them, I went to the back to make myself busy. I emerged a few seconds later carrying the first clipboard I found in the storage room.

“Come again,” said the witch, waving goodbye to the customers. Her posture was straighter.

“Seems like you handled that well,” I said, offering a high-five. She took it, the sound of our hands smacking against each other’s ringing true in the empty restaurant.

“I noticed that most people take our coffee and leave,” said Tessa. “What’s the point of having such nice decorations if the customers aren’t going to stay and enjoy them?”

She pointed to the Chinese evergreens that rested on the windowsill. Snake plants dotted the way to the bathroom, their pointy sword-shaped leaves an ode to the café’s ominous name. Decorations were sparser than I would like them to be, but in Tessa’s eyes it was more than enough.

“Interesting point you’re making,” I said. “Everyone enjoys coffee their own way. College students like to sit and soak in the free wi-fi. Businessmen come to pre-screen future interviewees. And some just take their purple cups and go back to work. Italy is the birthplace of espresso culture and there they have espresso bars where people stand and enjoy a quick cup. Here we like things Seattle-style with plenty of sitting.”

“Things evolve and change,” said Tessa, her eyes cast down. “Maybe me and coffee have more in common than I thought.”

That was out of character. The girl cleaned the smudges off her apron. For a minute I stared as she rubbed her fingers along the fabric, her hands never once moving from the apron. Her eyes didn’t move either.

The ringing of the door chime yanked me back to my senses.

“A customer,” said Tessa with little emotion. “I’ll take care of it.”

The customer wore a fine black suit with a red tie. His blond hair was slicked back.

“I don’t know, Rooney,” said the man as he held his phone to his ear. “I told Martha to send you a copy. Must’ve missed you somehow. Listen, I’m at this coffeeshop by Baker Street. Want anything? No, man, it’s not Starbucks. My ex-wife started workin’ there and I don’t wanna deal with that, that’s why.”

“Hello, sir,” said Tessa, but she was cut off.

“Yeah, get me a straight black coffee. Biggest size you have.”

“That would be two dollars.”

The man swiped his black credit card. He waited to the side and watched as Tessa poured the drink, keeping an eye on her figure without once cutting the call. When Tessa handed him his cup, he took a sip.

“This is crap,” he said, creasing his mouth into a frown. “Make another one.”

Tessa waited a second before taking the cup back.

“It’s a new cup. I poured it five minutes ago,” she said.

“Well then, I guess your coffee goes bad pretty fast.”

Tessa poured out the old cup and prepared a new one. I watched as the man inched away from the counter until he was out of earshot of the witch.

“Yeah, I’ll get those files to you by 9AM. Listen, man. This café has a barista with a smokin’ hot bod. Has a weird hat, though. What? Of course, I’d tap that. When have you ever not wanted to do a girl just because of her hat? C’mon, Rooney.”

As I watched this play out, I balled my fists. I took the to-go cup that Tessa prepared and shoved it in his face.

“Take it and leave,” I said to him.

“What the eff, man?”

“No assholes allowed. New company policy.”

He stared at me and took the cup in his hands. My eyes connected with his.

“Yeah, Rooney. I’m on my way over,” he said. After the man left, Tessa slouched her shoulders.

“He’s bad news,” said Tessa.

“A dirtbag is what he is,” I said.

“No,” said Tessa, putting her arm over mine. “He’s really, really bad news. I can sense it.”

That comment stopped me in my tracks. Tessa’s downcast look made me realize that there was something I missed. I tried to address it, but she turned to attend to a new set of customers.

“Today was a lot slower than yesterday,” said Tessa. She and Elise were wiping down the tables while I handled the cash register. The post-lunch rush had finished, leaving only a few stray customers in the restaurant.

“Fridays are usually like this,” I said.

“People save up their money and spend it all in bars,” said Elise. “At least, that’s how I am.”

“Do most people in the city have Saturday and Sundays off?” said Tessa. Elise raised her brow. Tessa and I convinced Elise that Tessa was from a rural part of the state and never left her small town before. It wasn’t entirely untrue, and it covered our bases whenever Tessa said something unusual.

“That’s right,” I said. “How is it where you come from?”

“People work every Saturday and some Sundays. There’s always a lot of work to do and never enough people… in the countryside, I mean,” said Tessa.

“Sounds about right,” said Don Mortimer. He and his wife Julie were sitting in a nearby table, each reading their own paperback.

“Are you originally from the countryside?” I said, bringing two cups of coffee and a warm croissant.

“Is this for us, dear?” said Julie.

“On the house,” I said.

“You’re too kind,” she said.

“Which means he doesn’t take after his uncle,” said Don with a chuckle. “We both grew up in farms. They don’t exist anymore, but sometimes I like to reminisce. Promise to scatter my ashes in a nice field, will you Julie?”

“Don’t talk like that,” said Julie. “You’re as healthy as can be.”

“You can’t die yet Don,” I said, retreating to my spot behind the counter. “If you do, the Twisted Cauldron will lose half its customers.”

Our corner of the café burst into laughter. Don slapped his knee so hard I thought the whole thing would fall off. I looked at my watch and saw that it was time for Tessa and I to take a break.

I invited her to sit in the table closest to the window.

“I brought us some sandwiches from home,” I said.

“What!? When did you have time to make them?”

“This morning,” I said. “They’re ham and cheese.”

Tessa bit down on the sandwich. She tilted her head.

“Not your best work,” she said.

“You’ve literally known me for a day,” I said. “Cut me some slack. Just for that, I’m taking it out of your paycheck.”

“I get a paycheck?”

“It would be illegal otherwise,” I said. “It’s in US dollars. Do witch colonies have their own currency?”

“We use dollars too. I used up most of my money traveling here, so any help is appreciated. I can’t wait to spend money at malls!”

Tessa had a glitter in her eyes that made it hard not to smile.

“Oh yeah? Why do you want to go to a mall when you can just order stuff online?”

“I’m not too well-versed on the wizardry that powers the World Wide Web. I would rather not experiment with such powerful forces,” she said. “I want to go to a clothing store, try out clothes and buy some. Just like they do in movies.”

“Other than movies, did you… experience anything else from the outside?” I said. Having this conversation made me realize that if Tessa didn’t know about the internet, she sure as hell didn’t own a phone.

“No, not at all. For entertainment, young witches would raid the library and read through musty books. Once a month they hosted a movie showing in the lawn outside of the council.”

That made me appreciate my freedom to access entertainment far more. It also made me question why, if witches were so insular, did they allow Tessa to journey outside. Did all witches go through this, or was Tessa special?

“Then going to the mall is going to blow your mind,” I said. “You ready?”

“Ready for what?” said Tessa, finishing the last of her sandwich.

“I’m taking you to our local mall tonight. Showing you around.”

“Really?” said Tessa. She jumped up, causing the chair she sat in to stumble back. “Will you really take me Raul?”

“Sure,” I said. “It’s the least I could do. We can go after we close at 6PM.”

“I’ll be sure to do an extra good job until then,” said Tessa. She took a broom from the storage closet and swept the floors with a bounce to her step. Even I found it hard to contain my own grin.

“Does this look good?” said Tessa. She flaunted her outfit in the middle of my kitchen. She wore a tight-fitting blazer over a white button-up

shirt. A long black skirt with purple accents fluttered as she walked in circles.

"Yeah, it does," I said. It was very attractive.

"Say it like you mean it," she said. "I don't believe you."

"You'll be the prettiest witch there, I'm sure."

"There's no doubt about that," she said. "Most witches have terrible sense of style. Black one-piece, black socks, black shoes. If you walk into a house of witches you'd think someone had died."

"And what about me?" I said. I wore the same outfit I did for work at the Twisted Cauldron, except I changed into a different pair of slacks.

"You look like you're about to serve someone a hot muffin," she said, laughing.

"Yeah, well I'm your boss, so my sense of style is always on point," I said. "You ready?"

Tessa put on her witch hat and fixed it in place. For some reason she wasn't satisfied until it rested atop her head at a specific angle.

"Now I am."

The outdoor mall was a few blocks further than the café, and in the opposite direction. It featured dozens of stores, each only a few feet apart. Tessa pointed out every little thing that was the least bit interesting to her. From a gaudy store display to a woman's revealing neckline, nothing escaped her notice.

"Careful," I said. "You might get sensory overload."

"My senses are finely tuned and keener than any man's—what's that?"

Tessa ran to a clothing store's window display.

"That skirt's so cute," she said. Her face was so close that her breath fogged the glass. She referred to a light yellow skirt with tiny floral designs dotting the fabric.

"Do you want to try it on?" I said.

"You can do that? Even to the window ones?" she said.

"Well yeah. They sell anything that's on display."

"Then let's go," she said. Tessa took my hand and brought me inside the store. It was lightly perfumed and filled with women browsing.

"Excuse me," said Tessa. She was so loud that every woman inside turned to stare at us.

A woman approached her with a smile.

“Hello. What would you be interested in?” said the woman.

“That skirt!” said Tessa, pointing at the back of the display. “Can I try it on?”

“The display one? We have it over here,” said the woman. She guided us to the rack with the new arrivals and unhooked the desired skirt. Tessa was so overjoyed that she tightened her grip on my arm, threatening to obliterate every bone inside.

While Tessa went to the dressing room, I looked through the price. At $129, it was out of my price range… but I could technically afford it. By “technically” I mean that there are more than $129 in my bank account. It would hurt, but I could live with it.

“Raul!” said Tessa from halfway across the store. I jogged to her side to avoid any further embarrassment.

The new skirt complemented her blazer in a way the old one never could. Tessa seemed to realize this too, as she grabbed onto it with one hand and danced.

“I can see myself doing some wonderful mag—”

I ran up to Tessa and put my hand over her mouth. I removed it quickly after, careful to avoid any more attention.

“Some wonderful, uh… work, with this skirt,” said Tessa.

“You look so lovely,” said the woman, startling me.

“I agree,” I said. “So, you wanna get it?”

“I do, but I haven’t been paid yet,” said Tessa.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll pay for it.”

“Eh? You sure?” said Tessa, her eyes bright.

“Yeah, why not?” I said. I’m young. Savings are for smart, boring people.

“Your boyfriend sure is nice,” said the woman. “I can ring you up.”

“We’re not…” I looked back, but Tessa had already gone to change out of her skirt.

She walked out, holding the shopping bag close to her chest. She thanked me repeatedly, making me blush every time. If this keeps up, I would end up buying her a whole outfit.

“I’m getting a little hungry,” she said.

“Any place in particular you’d like to go?”

“In that case,” she said, tapping her index finger on her lips, “can we go to a family restaurant?”

That was an odd request, but I complied. I took us to a restaurant that mostly served pasta, pizza, and salad. Inside, its servers swerved around tables to attend to the myriad customers. What did I need to do to get this many people inside the Twisted Cauldron? Maybe if I lowered the price of our drinks to better compete with that chain, we could… No. It wasn't the time to think about those things.

The hostess sat us in a two-person booth located in the heart of the restaurant.

"This is so exciting," said Tessa. Her eyes carefully scanned the two-sided menu. "How does this work?"

"You've never been to a sit-down restaurant before?" I said.

"Witches have taverns," said Tessa. "Different experience."

"Our waiter will come and take our drink orders. After they bring our drinks they'll take our food order. That's it… I think."

The waiter came over with a small notepad in hand.

"Any drinks I can start you off with tonight?" he said.

"Yes," said Tessa. "I'd like this beer here, please." She pointed to a draft beer. Does she realize that he might ask for her ID? Does she even have one?

"Could I see your ID, please?" said the waiter.

"Of course," said Tessa. She reached into her skirt pocket and handed the man a Twisted Cauldron business card. The main read it for a few seconds, then returned it to her. No further questions asked.

"And you, sir?"

"Uh… I'll have the same thing," I said, showing him my driver's license.

"I'll have those right out for you," he said.

As soon as he stepped away from the table, I leaned over.

"You showed him our business card?"

"I might've used magic to make it look like your ID… only with the name and picture changed."

"And only he could see it? That's pretty cool," I said. No harm, no foul. Tessa was 21 years of age, after all. I feel less thrilled about her using her magic that brazenly, but who am I to judge?

"Do witches have specializations? Or can everyone do every kind of magic?" I said, sipping on the beer. It had a mild aftertaste, but the drink

itself was delicious. Tessa seemed to think the same, for half her glass was empty by the time the waiter took our orders.

"Every witch can do basic magic like I did earlier, but to get to the really powerful stuff you need to specialize. Let's see," she said, counting off her fingers. "There's war witches that use their powers for defense."

"Like fire and explosions?" I said.

"Yeah. Then there's witches that can control the weather, witches that can control the soil and rocks, witches that can manipulate the atomic structures of certain things, witches that can control hundreds of items at once, witches that can fly. The list goes on," she said.

"And what's your specialization? Or what do you plan on specializing?"

"I don't… I mean, It's not that I wouldn't… Ahh, how should I put it?"

"It's OK," I said. "Do witches roam outside the witch colony? Like, are they part of everyday life?"

"To my knowledge, no," she said. "Witches keep to themselves."

I thought about asking her why, but seeing her somber face made me reconsider.

"And what about you, Raul? What are your future ambitions?" said Tessa.

"The café is all I have," I said. "Think up some new ways to make money, fail at those, then try something else. You know how it is." I forced myself to laugh, but Tessa didn't take the bait.

"You don't seem too happy about that," she said.

"I was part of a PhD program a few years ago, but I dropped out. Then my uncle sort of dropped the café on my lap."

I didn't want to think about it any more. I had nothing but painful memories from those days. There's no way for me to change things now.

"I can help," said Tessa.

"You… what?" I lifted my head. Tessa had a soft smile on her. It wasn't the intense, world-consuming grin. I managed to hold back my tears by summoning every ounce of strength I had.

"I'll help you with your dream. To make the café a better place. To make it a place where everyone can leave with a smile."

"Those are some big words coming from a girl who's only worked there for two days," I said. "And thanks."

The food arrived. Tessa gorged on her shrimp fettuccine. I ate one of those margherita pizzas sprinkled with a zealous amount of greens. It was a lot better than I was expecting., but I know that was due to my company that anything else.

"That was so good," said Tessa. Night had overtaken the day. Bright street lamps illuminated the narrow streets, closed off for pedestrians.

"Glad you enjoyed it," I said. "Anything else you want to do?"

"Can we walk around? Just for a little bit."

"Of course," I said. As we made our way down the street, I noticed that Tessa kept close to me. It wasn't a cold night, which meant… I peeled my eyes away from her gorgeous hair. I tried thinking of something else. Something besides the fact that there was a gorgeous woman so close to me. Or that the brim of her witch hat was half an inch away from my face. It was no use. Her lavender perfume reeled me in. Hook, line, and sinker.

"Woah," she said, pointing her finger at the movie theater. "What's that?"

The cinema was the largest business in the outdoor mall. Its name was proudly displayed in flashing neon letters, like a Christmas tree obelisk.

"It's where we watch movies?" I said.

"You have a place dedicated just for that?"

"There's actually a dozen theaters in there. They have a few movies to choose from, too."

"There's more than one to watch? How often do new ones get released?" she said.

"There's new releases every week," I said.

"Every week!? You can't be serious," said Tessa.

"Do you want to watch one now?" I said. It was half-past eight. Not terribly late for starting a movie, but I wasn't too keen on only sleeping five hours.

"Not tonight," said Tessa. "I'm tired. But I'd be interested in doing it in the future."

The future. That's right, there was no reason to think that tonight would be the last date I would have with Tessa.

Wait. This is a date? If so, it would make it my first in nearly three years. Hopefully next time I don't have to shell out $129 for a dress.

We walked aimlessly until 9:30 PM. The streets had cleared somewhat, leaving us to make the walk back alone.

“I can’t believe there’s so many clothing stores,” said Tessa. “Do we really need so many?”

“They can’t all offer the same clothes, right?” I said. “There’s so many options because customers crave the different offerings. Plus, you have stuff like fast fashion and… I’m boring you, aren’t I?”

Tessa laughed.

“Not at all, Raul. I think it’s cute when you try to be all businessy. Every time you see something, you try to explain it.”

“Is that weird?” I said.

“No, it isn’t. The witch colony works a little differently. There’s so much magic around you that it’s hard to know whether something is really happening, or if someone is causing it. When witches are little and they misbehave, the older witches teach them stories about how evil witches curse misbehaving children with nightmares. When you have a bad dream you’re left thinking if there’s someone out there trying to curse you.”

“That seems like a lot of power in one place,” I said. “You shouldn’t live in fear.”

“Forgive me,” said Tessa, throwing her hands up. “I didn’t mean to say that witches live in fear of other witches. I only meant that sometimes… the truth is a little harder to understand.”

The sound of sirens pierced my eardrum. One ambulance whizzed past us, heading in the same direction we were.

“What was that?” said Tessa. She had gripped my hand, likely without realizing it.

“It was an ambulance,” I said. “If someone’s sick or hurt, they take them to the hospital.”

We were near the city center, so hearing an ambulance wasn’t unusual. But I could see why someone who had never seen one in action would be surprised.

“Why does it have to be so frightening?” said Tessa. We resumed our walk, but she kept her grip on my hand.

“It’s to alert the other cars. Once they get out of the way, the ambulance can get to where it needs to go faster.”

“That’s very interesting, actually. Makes me feel like a dolt for not realizing it sooner.”

“You’re too hard on yourself, Tessa.”

Two blocks over, we arrived at the scene. The ambulance was stopped in front of a towering apartment building. Surrounding it were two cop cars, their lights flashing all the same.

“I think we might’ve stepped into something here,” I said.

“Ugh…” said Tessa, her grip tightening.

Three cops left the marbled lobby. They walked in step and led a handcuffed man in front of them. I recognized the blond with sharp features as the same customer from this morning.

“Hey, isn’t that the guy who—”

“Make it stop!” said Tessa. The girl had her knees on the floor, both hands holding her head.

“What’s wrong? Tessa!”

“I can’t… My head is…”

I put my arms around her. I didn’t know what was happening. Was it something we ate at the restaurant? That couldn’t be, right?

“Do you want me to take you to the hospital?”

“I can feel their pain. The hate. An empty room. Solid black with… one way out.”

“Who are you talking about, Tessa? The police? The guy?”

“No,” she said, gripping her brunette locks. “The person… in the ambulance.”

My heart skipped a beat. I had no idea what was going on. The blond was pushed into the police car. His face was pale and blood dotted his disheveled jacket. Whoever was put in the ambulance was a victim.

“The tears… followed by relief. Glad he finally did it! Glad he’s been… caught,” said Tessa.

The ambulance left, followed shortly after by the police cars.

“Tessa, we need to get you to a hospital. Can you walk?” I said.

“I’m fine now,” she said, struggling to stand. “Head doesn’t hurt as much anymore, at least.”

Tears rolled down her face. She took a step away from me and wiped her face.

“I’m sorry you had to see me like that,” she said.

“What just happened?” I said.

“Let’s just go home, alright?” she said. Tessa walked in front of me. It took me a few seconds, but I followed her. I felt lost and utterly useless.

Chapter 3

I got up at my usual time, turning off the alarm as quickly as I could. A few feet away from me, Tessa laid in the bed. Her chest heaved ever so slightly, and her face looked like a portrait of tranquility. It was a far cry from the girl who screamed bloody murder the night before.

That was when I decided that I would close the café for the day. I ate my cereal in silence. Tessa's panic attack yesterday, if it could be called that, was burned into my brain. The witch was in pain and there was nothing I could do to help. It made me realize that I knew nothing about her at all.

I welcomed her into my home and spent the better part of 48 hours with her, but Tessa was still a mystery to me. I had learned much about her past, but that was nothing in the grand scheme of things.

The street was empty, as it was on every other Saturday at 7AM. I unlocked the doors to the Twisted Cauldron and taped a message I wrote at home on the door.

"Due to unforeseen circumstances, the Twisted Cauldron will be closed today. We apologize for any inconvenience. Please come see us tomorrow at 8AM!" it said.

I locked the door behind me and wandered around. Was this the best course of action? Saturdays were our slowest days and few regulars dropped by. I'd hate to disappoint regular customers, so today was as good a day as any to close. It wouldn't do much to our bottom line.

I walked down the street to a consumer electronics store. Half an hour later, I crossed the street to the grocery store. In all, I was done by 8:50AM.

"What do people do for fun again?" I said aloud. It hit me that this was the first day off I had given myself since my uncle dropped the coffeeshop on me.

It was a beautiful day. The perfect mix between hot and cold. The birds agreed as well. Grey finches sang their hearts out a few feet above my head. If Tessa felt well, we could go out to the park. Maybe I could convince her to show me more of her magic.

Would she want more time alone? The packages on either hand were for Tessa, but maybe all she wanted was space to think. Living in a shared

studio apartment takes away a lot of that space. I paced up and down the concrete slabs of sidewalk for several minutes.

I would let her decide. Ask Tessa if she wanted me to leave the house for a bit and respect whatever her decision was. That sounded right.

The door to my apartment cracked open as slowly as possible. To my relief, she was asleep. My foot got tangled with one of the dining tables, causing it to slide a few feet and screech the whole way. But the girl did not wake up.

She's still alive, right? The sound was enough to wake up the neighbors. Certainly me if our positions were reversed.

I used my laptop to surf the web until she woke up. Tessa yawned.

"Feeling rested?" I said.

"I am," she said, jumping out of bed and stretching. "What time is it?"

"It's 10:30AM," I said.

"What!? But the café… who's at the café!?"

Tessa started stripping off her pajamas and using magic to summon her work clothes.

"I closed it down for today," I said, looking away. Tessa really is an act-first, think-later person.

"Why? Because of me?" she said. When I looked, she was dressed in her black skirt and tights.

"No," I said. "I wanted a day off, is all."

"You're lying." She walked to the door, her pointy hat in hand.

"It's done," I said, following her to the door. "I put a sign in front. Who knows how many customers have seen it already."

"What about Elise?"

"I told her too," I said.

"Fine," she said. "But I'm changing back into my pajamas."

The girl went to the bathroom. A few seconds later, she emerged in her cotton button-up and pants, as promised.

"What do you want for breakfast?" I said.

"Can I have cereal?"

After I served her the bowl, she sat across from me at the table. There was a long silence.

"Did you go to the store?" she said, eyeing the bags I left on the sofa.

“I did. Some of it is for you. Want a look?”

She nodded. Tessa wasn’t in a good mood, but I could understand why.

“Here, open it.”

I gave her the bag from the electronics store. She pulled out a flip phone.

“What’s this?” she said. “A phone?”

“Yup.”

“Don’t you have one of these already? You know, for a guy that works at a café, you sure spend a lot of mon—”

“It’s yours.”

“It’s mine?” she said.

“Yeah. Not as fancy as a smartphone, but it can take pictures and you can use it to talk to whoever you want,” I said.

“This is...amazing,” she said. “I’m still mad at you, though.”

“That’s fine,” I said. “I don’t expect the cookies to fix anything either.”

“There’s cookies?” said Tessa. She ran to the other bag and took out a dozen freshly-baked chocolate chip cookies.

“Thank you,” she said. Tessa put both things down on the table. Her eyes fixed on them. “About last night…”

“Tessa, you don’t have to say anything. We all have secrets to hide.”

Her eyes locked into a point behind me. There were hundreds of things I could say, but I had a feeling none of them would make the situation any better. Tessa closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“I’m an empathy witch,” she said. “That means I can understand people’s emotions. More than that. I take their feelings and make them my own. When I’m close enough to someone with really strong emotions, it’s even worse.”

“Can you… resist it?”

I thought about yesterday. There was no doubt about it. She sensed whatever the person in the ambulance felt, none of it good.

“I’m so sorry,” I said. “Is there any way you can make it less intense?”

“I can try. It’s easier when the emotions aren’t as powerful. By when someone is really happy, or angry, or sad, then I can’t do anything about it. After we turned into that street, the scene sort of… played out in front of

me. I saw how the two people were having dinner. Then they got into an argument and the color around the man turned bright red. He slapped them across the face. Pinned them to the wall."

Tessa brought her soft hands to her cheek.

"Then he…!"

"Tessa," I said, walking to her side. "It's OK. Everything will be alright."

She grabbed my shirt and pressed her face to it. Muted sobs echoed through my body. Tessa trusted me through and through. I didn't deserve that. All I did was offer her a job and a shelter. What was I to her but some stranger she met two days ago?

If that was how I felt, then why was I on the verge of tears? I don't understand anything.

She separated from my shirt a minute later, leaving a damp spot where her face was.

"Do you feel better?" I said.

"A bit," she said, wiping the last of her tears away.

"Want to go to the park?"

"If it's OK with you, I'd rather stay inside today."

"No problem," I said. "Want some coffee?"

"Only if you add extra chocolate," said Tessa.

"No problem," I said as I went to work on the espresso machine. At $100, it was nothing compared to the $10,000 brewer in the Twisted Cauldron, but it worked. Humility has its own sweet taste.

"Did this kind of thing happen often in the witch colony?" I said.

"Not really," she said, surveying her phone from all sides. "Witches are very good at keeping their feelings under control."

"Sounds like my kind of place."

I regretted it as soon as I said it.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she said.

"Just forget it," I said, putting a cup in front of her. I held out my hand.

"Need some help?"

"I can read the instructions in the box, thanks."

I served myself some coffee and watched her spread the instructions out on the table. Her gaze darted from the phone to the instructions and

back. I would be lying if I said I didn't find it amusing. Hopefully she can't sense that.

But still, a human with the power to understand other people's emotions. There's only so much you can get by using visual cues. Tessa can put herself in their shoes and understand them at a distance. I can think of a million ways that could be abused in the wrong hands. Every little thing I learn about Tessa pulls me further away. I understand her less, in a way.

"I see you preprogrammed your own phone on here," said Tessa.

"In case you need it."

"I think I'll delete it."

"Then you'll have no contacts. That's sad, you know," I said, taking a sip of my drink for added dramatic effect.

"I'll ask Elise tomorrow," she said. "What else do you do on your days off?"

"I don't have any of those."

"None at all?" said Tessa, putting down her phone.

"Nope," I said.

"Then what do you usually do when you come home from work?"

"I read the news and do chores. Taxes and cleaning, mostly."

"I was expecting you to have some more… interesting hobbies," she said. "But you don't even own a television! What kind of person are you?"

"If you're that interested in watching something, I have an account for a streaming site," I said.

"A what?" said Tessa. Figures she didn't know what they were. I went to the site I was subscribed to on my laptop. Hundreds of shows and movies popped up, all organized in a myriad of different categories.

"You can watch this many!?" she said. The flip phone brought her to the early 2000s, and with this I dropped her straight into the next decade.

"What sounds interesting to you?" I said. She took the mouse and scrolled through the different categories. Some of them, like Horror, made her hiss. Others, like certain action categories, made her grin. Her favorite category was Long-Haired Women Who Kick Ass Using Guns. It was oddly specific and piqued my interest. I would soon learn that introducing her to this was a grave mistake.

We watched the first episode of a show from the comfort of my sofa. Then one episode turned to two. Two turned to five.

“I think it’s about time for lunch,” I said. I struggled to scrape my butt of the couch.

“You can do that,” she said, holding her hands to her knees. “I’ll start the next one.”

I gave her a dirty look, but she ignored me. The next episode started with a loud bang, followed by a roaring shout from the protagonist. But I could not watch, for I had lunch to make.

“Television is really powerful,” said Tessa.

“Can’t say I disagree,” I said as I washed the dishes. Dinner transpired in the same way that lunch did. I cooked while Tessa watched her show. By late afternoon, Tessa had had enough. Two bags formed under her eyes. She laid flat on her bed, levitating her phone and socks over her hand like some supernatural juggler.

“Had enough?” I said.

“For today, at least. How can people get anything done when there’s so many interesting things to watch?”

“I don’t know,” I said. There was something pleasing about the way Tessa interacted with the world around her. To her, everything had a purpose. She made it her job to discover what it was.

We went to bed shortly after that. I was woken up at my usual time by the pleasing aroma of freshly-brewed espresso. Tessa stood by the kitchen, pouring milk foam into two porcelain cups.

“Morning,” she said with a smile.

“Good… morning,” I said. The witch had put on her working clothes and done her makeup.

“What motivated you to wake up so early?”

“Just a desire to be helpful,” she said. “We want the café to be a place where people can go to smile, right? That’ll only happen if we put in all our effort.”

“That’s right,” I said, reciprocating the smile. I took the saucer in my hand and drank from the cup. It was sweet with acidic undertones. A thousand feelings erupted inside me, all of them as brilliant as the girl in front of me.

“How is it?” she said.

It was, without a doubt, the most delicious cup of coffee I had ever had.

Chapter 4

“Are you excited to see your sister?” said Tessa. She and Elise manned the counter while I did some miscellaneous tasks.

“I guess I am,” said Elise. She fixed her eyes on a poster next to the door. The name “Moka” was written in bold pink letters, followed by “Poetry Slam”. Getting an up-and-coming artist to show up at your café isn’t easy. Getting one to show up for free is next to impossible… unless one of your staffers is family.

“Got a new invention?” said Don. He and his wife had been regular customers for years, but after Tessa joined they came with more frequency.

“My sister’s coming to lead a poetry night tonight,” said Elise. “Probably not your style, Don.”

“Probably not,” said Don, laughing.

“Good morning girls,” said Julie.

Elise took Don’s order and passed it to Tessa. The witch scanned the receipt and went to work.

She brought the orders to Don and Julie’s table.

“It’s so good to see you,” said Don. “And the sandwich isn’t vegetarian this time.”

“She hasn’t made that mistake in two weeks dear,” said Julie. “You’ve gotten so much better in the last three weeks.”

“You’re too kind,” said Tessa, bowing her head. “Raul’s been making sure I do the best job I can.”

As soon as I heard that, I winced. Don’t make me sound like the bad guy, Tessa…

“Raul!” said Don. I dropped what I was doing and walked over.

“Don’t be so hard on Tessa,” said Don. “The coffee tastes a lot better when she prepares it. Maybe she should be the one to teach you a thing or two.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I said. Tessa and I walked away. She nudged my shoulder.

“Don likes me more,” she said.

“Sure he does,” I said. For all the flak Don gave me, there was no denying that Tessa had improved. It had been exactly three weeks since

Tessa nearly collapsed on me in the sidewalk. She hadn't experienced any similar attacks since.

Our customer volume also increased. It was hard to tell if something as intangible as Tessa's witch allure was what brought about this increase. Regardless, I couldn't rest. The Twisted Cauldron couldn't compete in price, so I needed to find something else to attract customers.

We closed the café at 6 PM to prepare for the poetry slam. This meant mopping the floor, rearranging the tables, and bringing out more food. Tessa had a jump to her step as she helped with the preparations. She was more chipper than usual.

"You seem excited," I said.

"I've never done poetry," she said. "To express your thoughts in a way that cuts off the excess… it's very unlike anything witches do."

"You're free to recite your own piece," I said.

"I can't. I mean, I don't have anything written. And I'll be working…"

"Elise and I can handle it if you decide to participate," I said. Given how eccentric Tessa can be sometimes, I would be interested in hearing what kind of piece she would come up with.

The door opened, unleashing the loud *ting* from the bell above. In walked a dark-skinned woman with long pink dreadlocks.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello," I said, shaking her hand. "It's so nice to see you."

"You're Raul, right?"

"That's right," I said. "And this is Tessa. And over there is—"

"Hello Moka," said Elise. She walked up behind me with her hands crossed.

"Ellie," said Moka. She went to hug her sister, but Elise stepped back.

"You're looking well," said Elise.

"You too…"

The pair stared at each other for what seemed like an eternity. The silence was crushing me.

"So…" I said. "How was your flight from New York?"

"It was good," said Moka. "Raul, would you excuse us? I'd like to talk with my sister alone."

"He stays," said Elise.

“Fine by me,” said Moka. “It’s been a while.”

“Only two years,” said Elise. “But who’s counting? Mom certainly isn’t.”

“Ellie… You know how things between mom and I are—”

“Complicated, I know. But you could’ve stopped by or called more often,” said Elise.

“I came to make peace with you,” said Moka. Her gaze swept the hardwood floor.

“This is purely business,” said Elise. “You bring the fans and we give you a place to perform. Strictly business.”

“Did you tell Mom I would be here?”

“And break her heart? I didn’t,” said Elise. “Now if you excuse me, I have work to do.”

Elise did an about-face and went for the storage closet. Tessa polished a table a safe distance away. That left only me to deal with the fallout.

“Sorry about that,” I said. “Elise can be a little of a straight-edge sometimes.”

“Thanks,” said Moka. “It runs a little deeper than that, though.”

Her pink locks sprouted from the top of her head and came to a stop midway down her stomach. We both took a seat.

“Can I get you anything?” I said. “Coffee? Pastries? Sandwiches?”

“Water is fine,” said Moka. Tessa heard and brought a glass of chilled water, taking a seat next to us.

“Your hair is really pretty,” said Tessa. “Back in… where I come from, nobody has hair that colorful.”

“Thank you, uh… Sorry, what’s your name?”

“It’s Tessa,” she said.

“Tessa… Such a beautiful name.”

“And yours too,” said Tessa. “Raul had to spell it out for me a few times before I got it.”

“Moka, you mean? It’s my artist name. My real name is Amanda Carter.”

“Elise must be very proud to have a sister as accomplished as you,” said Tessa.

“Tessa, don’t…”

“It’s OK,” said Moka, putting her hands up. “She probably isn’t too thrilled for me to be here. Truth is that I owe her a lot and when she asked me… Well, I couldn’t say no.”

“I hope you’re not feeling forced to do this or anything,” I said. Last thing I would want is for someone to be at the Twisted Cauldron against their will.

“Not at all. I love meeting fans, especially those in my hometown. It’s just…” Moka took a deep breath and exhaled. “Ellie’s probably already told you all about it.”

“She hasn’t,” said Tessa.

“Elise doesn’t really share much with us. Mostly keeps to herself,” I said. I could count on one hand the number of times Elise had talked about her personal life. I’m not even sure I remember how old she is…

“I guess that’s not too surprising. I’ve loved writing all my life. Our mom, however, thought it was a dead-end job, so she forced me to go to college. I can understand it—she never got to go herself and now her daughter gets the chance. But that wasn’t me. So halfway through my law degree, I quit. Mom hated me for it, saying I squandered my potential. I left for New York and struggled a lot the first few months, but I made it work. I’m in a good place now, but I didn’t take my sister’s feelings into account. I know that makes me a lousy sibling, but I did what I had to do.”

Caught between family and passion. There’s never an easy answer. Tessa locked eyes with me and nodded. “I got this,” she meant. The message came across clearer than if she had used words.

“These feelings you have for your sister… could you try sharing them through your work?” said Tessa.

“That was the plan originally,” said Moka, pulling out a crumpled piece of paper from her pocket. “But I decided against it. Ellie might not like that.”

“Your fans are coming to see your raw emotions run loose,” said Tessa. “They want to follow your passion and ride along as you discover your own truths. Delivering anything less would be doing those coming here tonight a disservice.”

That was impressive. It made me wonder how much of that was Tessa’s own, and how much she borrowed from the television shows she devoured every night.

“You might be right,” said Moka. She flattened the paper on the table. “Maybe I’ll share my story.”

Behind us, a group of three people came in.

“Is this the place?” said one of them, looking at their phones.

“Are you blind? She’s right there,” said the second.

“It’s Moka!” said the third. Moka stood up to greet them.

“We better get started,” I said. “Elise and I will man the counter. Tessa, you make sure that everything is set up for Moka, alright?”

“Right on, boss,” said Tessa.

Atop our counter we had a mix of light bites like sandwiches and fruit, as well as copies of Moka’s poetry collections. If we sell through two-thirds of our stock, I would consider this event a success.

More people poured in through our door. Ten minutes before Tessa was set to start and we had sold a few hundred dollars’ worth of food and beverages. Half the books were sold. Maybe I was a genius, and I just never noticed?

Tessa directed people to the autograph line. She mingled with customers and made sure that all Moka’s needs were met. The witch remained composed even as the line swelled in size, always wearing a smile.

Elise, on the other hand, couldn’t have been less approachable. She tried to hide her frown, but it was all too obvious that she didn’t want to be there. During one lull in customer arrivals, I confronted her about it.

“Elise, I know you don’t get along with your sister, but try to…”

“I’m trying, OK?” said Elise. It was the most anxious I had ever seen her.

“Elise…”

“I’m going to take a break,” she said, balling up her apron and tossing it on the counter.

This was not good. I could let Elise handle things on her own, but I should at least try to be helpful. I called Tessa over.

“You’ll be managing the counter by yourself for a little bit,” I said.

“OK, but where are you going?” she said.

“To see if I can make a difference,” I said. I pushed through the line of people waiting to get an autograph of the poet.

“Moka,” I said, “can you start now? We can push the rest of the autographs to the end. How does that sound?”

“We can do that,” she said, confused.

“Great,” I said, then turned to address the crowd. “Hello everyone. We’ll be stopping autographs for now so Moka can get started. If there’s time, we’ll try to accommodate the rest of you waiting in line at the end.”

I left in a hurry, not even giving myself enough time to judge their reactions. A boss’s job was to make sure that everything ran smoothly. I, as the lone member of the human resources department, had to help keep the peace.

Elise sat on an overturned bucket. The only light in the room came from the glare of her phone screen. She looked mesmerized by the screen. A faint smile formed on her face.

“How are you?” I said.

“Doing good,” she said. “Just looking through old photos. When we were kids.”

I found a sturdy box and dragged it next to her. Elise showed me a picture of two girls, one nearly twice as tall as the other, smiling. The smaller one had vivid curly hair, while the other wore her black hair straight down.

“You two looked so cute back then,” I said. “What happened?” I delivered that joke in the most deadpan tone I could muster.

“You’re an idiot,” said Elise, letting out a chuckle. “I was 8 and she was 12. We used to be so close, even through college. Even in her undergrad, she used to come home on weekends and take me to the movies. I tried to play it off, saying she was lame, but I really enjoyed the time we spent together.”

“Did that change after she moved to New York?” I said.

“Before that,” she said, scrolling through photos on her phone. “Our dad passed away when I was 10 years old. It hit us hard, but I think it hit my sister the hardest. Dad was a writer. A novelist. He would recite his stories to us all the time. I used to think they were cool, but my sister… Amanda thought they were something more. He inspired her to write and gave her extra lessons after school. Took her to writing competitions for kids. When he died, Amanda tried to latch onto writing.”

“Mom wanted nothing to do with it. She saw it as a distraction. Amanda pushed back and wrote more than ever, letting her grades slip. Eventually, our mom agreed to let her keep writing if she kept her grades up and got into college. Amanda did it and graduated top of her class. Got a

nice office job, then went to law school just like my mom. You should've seen how happy that made Mom… but Amanda hated it. She hated every second of every day. She never told her, until one day Amanda just snapped. Went off on mom, about how she wanted to erase dad's legacy. She said a ton of mean things and just… left. Haven't seen her until tonight."

I let the weight of her words hang in the air. I only found out that Elise had a famous sister a week ago. Then I went ahead and asked her to invite Moka over, without thinking of the consequences. I can't even begin to imagine how difficult it would be to decide between your sister and your mother.

"I'm sorry," I said. "If there's anything I could do."

I said that, knowing full well there was nothing I could do. There was no way I could mend Moka's relationship with her mother. But Elise still loved her sister and respected her choices.

"Amanda made the choice to follow her goals. And she's already so successful. But me…" said Elise. "I don't have those."

"You're too hard on yourself."

"It's true, though. I don't have anything to strive for… anything I need," she said, standing up. "We should probably go back out there."

"Elise, you can't compare yourself to your sister. You're not her," I said.

"You're damn right I'm not her. She's smarter, more successful…"

"And what if she is?" I said. "You're not her. So what if it feels like you're not going where you want to go. There's still time. It's better that you stay put and figure out what you want—no, need to do. If you go out there chasing after some dream you don't even know you have, you'll end up worse than where you started."

"You're smarter than you look Raul," said Elise, rubbing her hand on her hair. "Thanks."

"No, thank you," I said. "For always being here for me and putting in an ungodly number of hours."

"I'm not sure I can go out there and face my sister."

"I don't think you'll have a problem with that," I said.

We left the comfort of the closet just in time to hear the applauses. Moka, standing on the center of the café, looked over to us. The surrounding lights were turned off, leaving her alone to shine in the light.

“This one is for my sister,” said Moka. Elise and I sat in a table at the back with Tessa.

“This is so much fun,” said Tessa in a low voice.

Moka took a deep breath and read off the paper on her hands. She spoke of their missing father, and all the promises he left unmet. Of their missing mother, and all the kindness she left unused. But most of all, she spoke of their missing sisterhood, and all the love she left unshared. Each verse bit the air, breaking down the barriers that separated her heart from mine. By the end I could see myself in Moka’s shoes. I was there in New York, with my suitcase in hand facing down a decrepit brick-laden building.

I saw myself attending countless poetry nights and open mic nights. After every night I had a new story to tell, and I would send my sister messages hoping to receive something back. I lied on my bed for hours on end, dreaming of a world where I hadn’t left the house. Of a world with my sister.

The final verse ended, and no one moved a muscle. It took me a few seconds to realize it was finally over. I joined the applause.

Elise was next to me, tears streaming down her cheeks and over her smile. I couldn’t imagine how powerful hearing such a targeted message would be. It also left something of a hole in my heart. I never knew my father, so I could only imagine what pain such an absence could lead to.

Tessa applauded as well, her cheeks a rosy red. She never mentioned her parents. I should ask her sometime.

The night continued, as Moka and other volunteers delivered heartfelt poems. As someone else took the stage, she came to see us.

“Ellie, I’m sorry,” said Moka. Elise threw her arms around her sister and gave her a hug.

“Come visit me sometime, alright?”

“I will,” said Elise.

I returned to tend to the counter by myself. As the event was winding down, an unexpected face volunteered to recite a piece.

“Hello everyone,” said Tessa. “My name is Tessa and this is my poem.” She took out a series of napkins and read off.

“Love is magic
Running is magic
Espresso is magic
Vacuums are magic

Sleeping is magic

Phones are magic

Eating 8 cookies in one sitting is magic

Elevators are…”

The poem continued like that for some time. Just what on earth was she thinking? Spouting off random verses doesn’t make it a poem. Not that I could do any better.

“Thank you so much for coming,” I told Moka as we finished cleaning up. All the guests had left half an hour before.

“No, thank you for inviting me. It was a lot of fun,” she said. “And that girl, Tessa? Her poem was something else.”

“It was her first time,” I said, laughing. “Don’t be so hard on her.”

“No, no, no. I meant that it was really good! It packed a real feminist punch, you know?”

I really don’t understand poetry at all.

Chapter 5

I focused my eyes on the green glow of the oven's clock. It read 3:14 AM, just five minutes more than the last time I checked.

Whenever I got a new idea, it took hold of me and didn't let go. A few weeks ago it was the idea of inviting an up-and-coming poet to the café. After that, it was my idea of giving Tessa the day off after her episode. This time, it was no different.

I was deciding whether I should introduce alcoholic espresso drinks.

Uncle Joe made sure to keep the Twisted Cauldron's liquor licenses up to date (a puritan he was not). I took the beverage server training course a year ago. It was legal for me to do so. The question was if I should.

We wouldn't be serving beer on tap or hoisting co-eds on kegs. We would serve espresso martinis, chocolate-vodka drinks, espresso with absinthe and gin, espresso noir, irish coffee, white russian, and so on.

I couldn't wait any longer. I had to give it a try. Moving as quietly as possible, I made my way to the kitchen. Opening the fridge lit up the space, making me recoil. What are you doing Raul?

"Hmm?" said Tessa. I stopped, hand gripping the Irish cream.

"Did I… wake you?" I said.

"Up for a late-night snack?" she said.

"That's right," I said, moving my hand away.

"Wait, no! That's alcohol," said Tessa.

"It's not what you think!" I said.

"Then what is it?"

"I wanted to make coffee with Irish cream…"

"At three in the morning! How is that better?"

The next morning, Tessa and I stood behind the café counter with bags under our eyes. The strands of hair that jutted beneath Tessa's hat pointed in every direction. It had been a long time since I felt so tired. And all because I wanted to try mixing coffee and alcohol.

"Hey Tessa," I said, as Tessa half-tripped trying to pour a customer's coffee order.

"What is it?" she said.

“What if we tried serving coffee with alcohol?”

“Don’t people have those things called bars here. They can get their fix there.”

“We’re not going to have beer on tap,” I said. “What do you think, Elise?”

“I think it’s just an excuse for you to get drunk during work,” she said.

“That’s what I thought too,” said Tessa.

“Why would you assume that? What have I said or done to indicate I would do that?”

I just got called a working alcoholic. That’s a serious accusation!

Don walked in by himself. His attitude was chipper than usual.

“Get me the regular, boy!” He slammed a $5 bill on the counter. “With extra cream this time. Julie’s at the hair salon so I ain’t getting any judgement from her today.”

“What’s gotten you so excited?” I said.

“It’s my pension,” he said. “Came double this month. Haven’t been this happy since I was a boy.”

“What’s a pension?” said Tessa.

“It’s money you get every month from your job after you retire,” said Elise, preparing Don’s drink.

“More money?” she said, looking up at me. “Do I get a pension?”

“After you work here for forty years, sure,” I said.

“What? Most witches don’t live past 85.”

“Most humans don’t either,” I said.

No matter what resistance I encountered, the idea of spicing up the café’s options with liquor remained in my mind. I slipped out of the café during my lunch break, giving Tessa some half-assed excuse. Then I walked a few blocks down to Mark’s, the local liquor store.

I nodded to the clerk. What kind of weirdo would go to a liquor store at 1 PM on a Thursday? This kind right here. I went to the section with vodkas and picked out a transparent bottle with brown lettering. Espresso vodka. The second bottle I grabbed was a coffee-flavored liquor mix. Finally, I grabbed a shaker and paid the clerk.

Tessa called out as soon as I stepped inside the Twisted Cauldron.

“Did you bring food for the rest of us?” she said.

“It’s not food,” I said, putting the brown paper bags over the counter. “It’s our new money-making machine.”

“What are you talking about?” said Elise.

I pulled out the two bottles of liquor and mixer. While the girls ogled at my purchase, I grabbed some honey and coffee beans.

“We’re making espresso martini,” I said.

“It’s barely noon… You should try this at home first,” said Elise.

“Are you sure about this?” said Tessa.

“Most definitely,” I said. I poured a shot of espresso into the titanium-colored shaker, along with a generous serving of the espresso vodka and liquor mix. Then I added two spoonfuls of honey and some ice cubes. I held the shaker firmly between my hands and shook. The contents inside the shaker made loud noises as I stirred them in place, causing the nearest tables to turn their attention to us. The whole scene, of café staffers preparing a martini in the middle of a weekday, must have looked bizarre. Then again, most geniuses are misunderstood.

I then poured the contents into a glass, making sure that no leftover chunks of ice made it to the drink. The result was a drink that was chestnut brown, with a light frothy crema on top. I sprinkled six coffee beans on top to finish.

“Looks pretty good, doesn’t it?” I said.

“It actually does,” said Elise.

“I want a taste of it. Can you make it after work?” said Tessa. She bent her knees to bring herself eye-level with the drink.

“Why wait? You can try it now,” I said.

“Are you sure?” said Tessa.

“Raul, I don’t think that’s a good idea…”

“What’s the worst that could happen? Tessa gets a little tipsy? We can handle it.”

I put the drink in Tessa’s hands. She eyed the drink, then put it to her mouth. Froth bubbles gathered on her upper lip as she took in sips. Those sips became gulps, and in the flinch of an eye she had downed the whole thing.

“You went… a little faster than I was expecting,” I said. “How was it?”

“It was a little too strong—hyuk. Masks the bitterness of the espresso pretty well.”

“That’s good,” I said, grabbing the two bottles of liquor in my hand. “Let me get a notepad so I can get more of your thoughts.”

I put the two bottles of liquor near the back of the storage closet. I wouldn’t want more people seeing them than necessary. I grabbed a pen and notepad and jotted down Tessa’s comments. The espresso martini would be a good drink to serve after 4 PM on certain days. I could see Jane Everywoman stopping by the Twisted Cauldron on her way home from work. It’s an entirely new market! The possibilities were endless.

When I returned, I saw Elise attending to a customer. Tessa, however, was nowhere to be seen.

“Have you seen Tessa?” I said to Elise as soon as she was free.

“Nope. Wasn’t she with you?”

Anxiety started to set in. I waited by the women’s bathroom, only to see a customer walk out of it. She wasn’t in the men’s bathroom either. Which could only mean that she ran out the door.

Where did that witch go? I hurried out, telling Elise to handle things while I looked for her. Desperately I called Tessa’s number, but she didn’t pick up. Why do you have a cell phone if you’re never going to pick up the phone?

I looked up and down the block, but there was no Tessa in sight. I took a deep breath. Tessa is an adult. She can handle herself. I need to find her but she’s no child. If I start with a clear head, things would get better.

And that’s coming from the guy who asked his employees to drink during work.

Next to Twisted Cauldron was a quaint flower shop. Maria, the old woman who runs the shop, stood outside its front door, her clippers in hand.

“Hello Maria,” I said. “Have you seen—”

Sitting outside her store window was a table full of flowers. One of the roses stood above the rest, its petals the size of my head.

“You’re seeing this too, right?” she said. “It’s not just me.”

“No, Maria, it’s not just you. Have you… have you seen Tessa?”

“That the girl you hired a few weeks ago? Heard her talking a little loopy. Something about how pretty the flowers are. Then I come out and see this.”

There was no doubt in my mind that this was Tessa’s doing. She was usually so careful about using magic around other people. Seems like her inhibitions were gone.

I ran out in the same direction. The flower shop was west so that's the direction I took. My eyes shot around me, trying to cover every inch of the street for any sign of magic.

What's the worst that could happen? That someone saw Tessa and outed her as a witch. The police would definitely detain someone for that, right? And if not them, then her witch colony would surely try to fix the mess. How they would do it is anyone's guess, but I can't see it being a pleasant experience for her.

Rounding the corner was a large oak tree. Etched into its bark was a cauldron, identical to the one in the Twisted Cauldron logo save for the lettering. I was getting close.

"Tessa!" I said, screaming. No response. Damn it, where did she go? I saw a group of people strolling by the sidewalk and showed them my phone.

"Excuse me," I said, beads of sweat rolling down my forehead. "Do you recognize this woman?"

I showed them a picture Elise took of Tessa and I some time back. Tessa asked her to do it on my phone. I just wanted to go back to work, but she insisted. Eventually she won out and I posed.

"Haven't seen her bro, sorry," said one. The rest of them agreed.

I continued down several more blocks, turning random corners. Eventually I found my second clue. In a row of bike stands, one of the n-shaped stands had been twisted into a heart.

This is ridiculous. What could have caused her to be so weird? It couldn't have been the alcohol, couldn't it?

I slapped my forehead. Of course. I gave her the espresso martini. She hesitated to drink it and I gave her the go-ahead. I insisted that Tessa get drunk and now she's on some subdued magical rampage. Given I have no idea what she's capable of, it might turn into a real problem soon. I needed to find her, and fast.

I pushed further into the city, emerging at the center. The skyline was dotted with gleaming office buildings. Scattered at the foot of them were hundreds of suited employees. I recognized one as Mr. Johnson.

"Mr. Johnson," I said, pausing to catch my breath. "Have you seen Tessa?"

"She ran out on you?" he said, scratching his bald head. "She rejected you, huh."

“No, that’s not it. Did y-you see anything weird? Anytime in the last thirty minutes?”

“Now that you mention it… when I got out of lunch and was walking over, I could swear there were plants breaking through the sidewalk. Like, literally growing right in front of my eyes. I’m sure it was the dumplings I had for lunch, but wow.”

“And where was this?” I said.

“I went to lunch at Gustavo’s,” he said.

“Thank you,” I shouted as I left.

Gustavo’s was a pub just off Main Street. The lunch rush ended, leaving the storefront uncrowded. Why anyone would get dumplings at a pub is beyond me. I followed the sidewalk and found, to my amazement, a series of brightly colored flowers growing through cracks in the pavement. They weren’t growing like Mr. Johnson described them, but they were all nearly half a foot off the ground. The flowers were all different, with different colors. They were all beautiful.

But there was no time to stop. I continued my manic run down the street, wondering what the limits of Tessa’s powers were. Could she turn one of those 50-story buildings into a flower? Or maybe she was powerful enough to animate the whole thing, turning it into a skyscraper monster. I honestly didn’t know.

I asked random people if they had seen Tessa, but none did. I ran around the town like a maniac. By this point it had been nearly two hours since I started.

“Are you looking for a girl with a pointy black hat?” said a woman. “I overheard you asking those people over there.”

“Was it this girl?” I said, showing her my phone screen.

“Yeah, that’s the one! She helped get my engagement ring off the street drain. Don’t ask me how, though. I was just crying by the curb when she offered to help me out. I looked up and there was the ring.”

“Do you know where she went?”

“She asked me where she could find a park, so I pointed her in the direction of Elm Park. That was like fifteen minutes ago.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“Is she your girlfriend? She seemed a little… drunk,” she said.

“No. She works with me. She’s also my roommate… which sounds really weird to say.”

“Well, I hope everything’s OK.”

“It will be,” I said, sighing. “Have a good afternoon.”

By the time I made it to Elm Park, the sun was finishing its shift. The blue sky had turned a shade of orange, making it just as colorful as Tessa’s brightest plants. The park was the biggest one in the city and, as its namesake suggests, was littered with elms. The park was composed of several wide walkways that spread through the area like arteries. Each of them was lined with trees.

I looked through many of the walkways but failed to find her. Whatever buzz Tessa had was likely long gone. If she had her phone, she could just call me and I would come find her, wherever she was. Even if she lost it, she was more than capable of asking for directions and getting back home herself. So why did I set off on this wild chase?

It was so obvious. It was because I didn’t want to lose her. I know nothing of witches and their magic, but I was afraid that Tessa might go too wild and reveal herself, forcing the witch colony to take her back home. I ran off because I was selfish. She’s only been a part of your life for one month, Raul.

“Is that you, Raul?”

I turned to see Julie sitting in a bench. Her white hair rested immaculately over her shoulder.

“It is. Mind if I take a seat next to you?”

“Of course,” she said. “I saw you running down the park earlier. Missing something?”

“It’s Tessa,” I said.

“She ran off on you? What did you do?”

“I might’ve asked her to try a new drink for the café. Seems like it made her go a little overboard.”

“So you’ve been going all over town trying to find her?” she said.

“That’s right,” I said. Makes me feel stupid when she says it.

“Sounds like a lot of fun.”

“It… what?”

“When Don and I went on our first date, he ran out on me. Made some ridiculous excuse and left me there. Only later did I find out that he was trying to play hard to get. Earned a good slap out of me.”

“That sounds like Don,” I said. Not sure what that has to do with anything, though.

“The reason I told you that is because you look anxious. Some problems might seem like they threaten to such you in, but after taking a step back, they aren’t so bad.”

“I chased after Tessa because I wanted to protect her,” I said. “But that doesn’t feel right.”

“Could it be that you went after her because you wanted to protect yourself?” said Julie.

“What do you mean?” I said. I knew what she meant, but I didn’t want to accept it.

“I go into your shop several times a week, Raul. Before Tessa came along, you used to be this husk of a man. You were polite and sweet, but I could look into your eyes and tell there was nothing keeping you here. Now, whenever Tessa is around, you’re constantly smiling. When Don first noticed he asked me if I thought you were taking any weird medication.”

She took a long pause, allowing it all to sink in. Had my attitude really changed that much in such a short time? Julie seemed to think so. There was no doubt that my life was livelier with Tessa around. It could have been something I first felt during the second night she came here, when I took her to see the mall.

“You’re falling in love with her, Raul.”

I felt my mind leave my body for a brief moment. It was frozen in time, staring ahead but not looking at anything. I couldn’t deny it. Tessa was smart and beautiful, but that wasn’t why I was falling for her. I was falling in love with Tessa because of the way she made me feel. More than anything, being with her gave me purpose. For the past month, I’ve been trying to help her acclimate to life here. Helped navigate her through all these new discoveries. In turn, she’s made me question who I am and what I do.

But I wasn’t ready to admit it.

“I—”

Tessa dropped from the elm tree above us. She landed on my lap, sending a wave of searing pain throughout my body. This girl!

“How’s—hyuk—everything?” she said. I pushed her to the side and flung myself off the bench.

“What the hell? You were up in that tree the whole time? And you’re still drunk?”

More importantly: how much did she hear?

“Relaaax,” said Tessa, cocking her head back. “I went to chase after a squirrel… but then it disappeared. Soooo I just stayed up there for a while. Then I saw you down there and went ‘Ah!’ Raul must be a comfy place to land. So I went swoosh and here we are.”

“Seems like you’ve had a long day. honey,” said Julie. “Raul will take you home, alright?”

“And I can watch more episodes!” she said.

“That’s right,” I said. How come she’s fine with a beer but liquor gives her the world’s longest hangover? At least she didn’t seem to hear anything about Julie’s conversation with me.

“Can you walk?” I said, holding out my hand.

“I’m perfectly fine,” said Tessa, but she used my hand to boost herself up anyway.

“See you later, Julie,” I said.

“Good night!” said Tessa.

“Have fun you two,” she said.

I navigated Tessa out of the park. The streets and surrounding sidewalk were filled with people walking out of their jobs.

“I’m so tired,” she said, fidgeting with the brim of her hat.

“Yeah, well, you’ve been all over town. We need to undo some of the magic you’ve left around town,” I said.

“Do we have to?” she looked at my nodding face and scoffed. “Fine.”

Tessa snapped her fingers. No colors or weird sounds followed.

“Did that work?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Probably.”

We walked to my apartment. By the time we arrived, it was nearly closing time at the Twisted Cauldron. I sent Elise a message letting her know that I would be there to clean up in a few minutes.

Tessa put her hat on the foot of her bed and threw herself on top of it.

“Are you OK?”

“I’m doin’ good,” she said, her words muffled by the pillow.

“I need to go lock up the café. Want me to make you something for dinner?”

“I can manage,” she said. “See ya.”

I swept the floors by myself, just like I had hundreds of nights before. All the café's lights were off, save for one in the middle. I stopped to look at the surrounding decorations. At Tessa's behest, I added more decorations. She had seen several witch movies and found their obsession with bats particularly fascinating. Now paper cutouts of them were taped to the wall. We were decorated for Halloween even though the day was still a few months away.

I put the broom aside and laid against the counter. I lived in the same place and worked at the same job, yet Julie was right: I felt like a completely different person. Maybe I should try visiting my mom sometime.

Chapter 6

Raul told Elise and myself that we would need to handle café operations by ourselves for most of the day. He was in the Twisted Cauldron, occupying one of the corner tables. Something about how he was going to make vendor calls? I wasn't really listening.

I prepared the first three cappuccinos of the morning, sneaking glances at Raul whenever I was away from the espresso machine. Every time I looked, I found him giggling or smiling while talking on the phone.

"Hey," I said, tugging Elise's sleeve.

"Tessa…"

"Hey," I said, again tugging at her sleeve.

"Can you stop that?" said Elise.

"Does Raul have a girlfriend we don't know about? He seems a little too perky over there on the phone," I said.

"Raul? Secret mistress? Oh boy, that's a good one," said Elise. She threw a laughing fit that lasted a minute, maybe more.

"Are you done?" I said.

"Raul's so daft he once let it slip that he was planning a birthday party for me… two months in advance."

"That's sad," I said.

"It's one of his character quirks, I guess," said Elise.

By mid-morning, Raul decided to take a break. He took a seat at the bar.

"How are the calls going?" said Elise.

"Convinced the muffin people to finally give me a bulk discount," said Raul. "Other than that, just checking in."

"You looked pretty happy out there," I said, throwing him one of my high-brow side-eyes. The protagonist of one of my favorite shows does it a lot.

"Is me smiling so weird?" said Raul.

"No…" I said.

"A little," said Elise.

"I'm just trying to be a good businessperson. Nobody wants to do business with a sad sack."

“Fair enough,” I said, before turning to complete a customer’s latte order.

“One complaint I’m getting from our suppliers is that our website sucks,” said Raul.

“We have a website?” said Elise.

“See? That’s the problem.”

Raul went to great lengths to explain to me what a website was just a short time ago.

“Elise, what do you know about web design?” said Raul.

“What kind of website are we talking about?” she said. Her brown eyes lit up. For the first time since I started working here, Elise looked genuinely interested in what Raul had to say.

“It’s a simple blog. Problem is it takes ages to load and doesn’t really have anything outside of our work hours. Even the menu’s out of date.”

“If it takes too long to load, it might be you’re clogging up the page with too many images. Or you’re on shared hosting with a sucky company,” said Elise. “As for the second, I’ll see what other cafés have on their website and make some changes.”

“Great,” said Raul. “Can you work on it today?”

“What about, you know, running the café? Serving customers?” said Elise.

“That’s right,” said Raul, tapping his chin. Did he really just forget that?

“How about this,” he said. “I’ll be done with my calls by lunch. After lunch, I’ll hold down the shop while you two work on the website.”

“You two? As in, myself included?” I said. I have enough trouble turning on the computer as is! What help would I be in developing a website?

“Don’t worry, Tessa,” said Raul. He put his hand on my shoulder, providing a little comfort. “I’m sure you’ll be a great help. Just follow Elise’s lead.”

The lunch rush went by in a flash, and before I knew it I was sitting in the same corner of the coffeeshop that Raul was in hours before. Truth be told, I wasn’t too thrilled about it. Elise would do the work and I would stare at the screen, perennially confused.

Elise made a few presses, bringing up an ugly website with black and blue letters. To call it an eyesore would be an understatement.

“Yikes,” said Elise. “The theme, coloring… it’s all so…”

“Bad?” I said.

“Exactly.”

Elise opened the pages of several other small-time cafés. They were all colorful and significantly more readable than the Twisted Cauldron’s. She tabbed between them and a page titled ‘Theme’ that let her change the design of the site.

“This doesn’t look as bad as I thought it would be,” I said.

“Choosing the theme is the easy part,” said Elise. “Here. This one seems most similar to that of the other companies.”

Elise pressed a button, bringing up hundreds of lines of text. I recognized the words and numbers, but they weren’t assembled in a way that made any meaningful sense. Absolute gibberish.

“Did it break?”

“No,” said Elise, typing away. “I’m just editing the CSS. Change the color, size of certain fonts… Stuff like that. Have you never seen it?”

“Oh, that’s good! I, uh, no. Never seen it,” I said. “Is there any way I could help?”

“There is, actually,” said Elise. “Do you think this looks good?”

The site she showed me had light purple with black. I could sense that Elise didn’t like it. At all.

“It’s pretty bad,” I said.

“You don’t have to be nice about—what? You said you didn’t like it?” said Elise.

“Yeah,” I said. “I don’t like it.”

“Me neither,” she said. “I didn’t expect you to have such a strong opinion about it.”

I didn’t think it looked that bad, but I trusted Elise’s opinion more than I do. That was when it hit me: Elise’s opinion wasn’t important either. What mattered was what the users—customers—would think. In front of us were a dozen of them, all primed and ready.

“I saw you tinkering with the different configurations,” I told Elise. “What if we showed them to customers and polled them?”

“That’s… That’s genius, Tessa. Let me load up the different configurations.”

Elise went to work, moving between windows so fast it almost gave me a headache. I left her to see how Raul was doing.

"How's it going?" said Raul. "You know, it's OK if you don't get everything figured out today. These things take time. Don't be too hard on yourselves."

"Elise is almost done," I said, letting the words roll off my tongue. Raul did a double-take before taking a towel and wiping down the counter.

"That's good," he said.

There was no fooling me, Raul. You were thinking about how you, with your fancy half-done graduate degree couldn't get it to work.

"I'm done," said Elise, her voice ringing across the café.

"Mind if we ask patrons for their help?" I said.

"As long as you're not too pushy, then sure," said Raul.

"We won't be," I said. There was no need. I could tell from just a few seconds how they felt about the website.

Elise and I took her computer to the nearest table. He was a middle-aged man with balding hair and wearing a suit. Given how nonchalant he felt, I assumed he was either unemployed or really didn't care about his job if he had one.

"Excuse us, sir," I said. "We're building a website and would love your input."

"Well, as you can see, I'm very busy here," he said. Just a minute ago he was laughing at his phone.

"We understand, which is why we'd like to sweeten the deal with an offer for free coffee," I said.

"I like that idea," he said. "I like it a lot. I'm in!"

"Great," said Elise. "Now we'll—"

"I didn't OK that!" said Raul as he marched over. I went over to intercept him.

"This will work," I said. I used my hand to pat his chest. "Plus, a little incentive goes a long way."

"Alright," he said. "Fine."

"And don't keep such a close eye on us! Don't you have customers to serve?"

"I, uh…"

"Get back to work, pretty boy," I said. Raul returned to his post. The throwaway compliment sent his mind into a bubbling mess of thoughts. I

didn’t need my powers to know that.

I returned to help Elise. The customer was browsing through the first layout. When he finished, we moved on to the second design.

“What did you think of each of them?” said Elise.

“They’re both good,” he said. “But I like the second one more.”

“Any other comments?” I said. Elise jotted them all down. When he finished, I pulled Elise apart.

“The old guy’s lying to us,” I said.

“Why would he lie?” said Elise.

“To make us feel better? Not sure. But I got a sense that he disliked the first design you showed him a lot.”

To say that he disliked it was an understatement. The first layout reminded him of earlier times. Of an age where he had a steady girlfriend, a steady job, and no medical bills.

We continued down the café. Every person had some personal reason that made them like one design over the other. Sometimes they were honest about which design they liked and why, but most of the time their responses were generic. It was up to me to extract the real information.

By closing time, we had done 30 interviews. Not too bad.

“We finished designing the website,” Elise told Raul. “I’ll send you an email with details on some of the stuff. Added a few plugins you might find interesting.”

“You two work insanely fast,” he said.

“It’s all thanks to Tessa,” she said. “She has a knack for reading people. Almost like magic, really.”

Elise left, leaving Raul and myself to finish cleaning up. We locked the door to the Twisted Cauldron behind us and headed home.

“Almost like magic, huh,” he said.

“That’s right,” I said. I took hold of his arm and tugged. “It’s getting late. We should hurry home.”

“Don’t change the subject!” he said.

“You worry too much. I didn’t cast any spells. I just read off their emotions.”

“And you won’t get in trouble for using your magic to help me?”

He had a point. The rules in the colony weren’t very explicit about using magic for monetary gain, but that was because witches didn’t really own any businesses outside the colony. Still, I had no regrets. I used magic

to help the Twisted Cauldron, and in my eyes there's nothing I would rather use it on. Plus, it made Raul happy.

"I won't," I said.

"That's good," he said, smiling. "I think I have another idea."

"Really? What is it?"

"Cascara," he said.

"Pardon?"

"It's the name given to drinks made with coffee husk. Ground up the husk and blend it with sugar. Then you can mix that with syrup to make drinks with it. I think our suppliers might have some available."

"Coffee husk? I do magic, but that's just crazy," I said.

Chapter 7

“Tessa, let me go through,” I said.

“No! Not today!”

She was rooted in front of my apartment exit.

“Someone needs to open the Twisted Cauldron.”

“I have the keys right here,” she said, dangling them in front of me. I reached out to grab them, but she yanked them away too fast. “I told you: today is your off day.”

“I don’t take off days,” I said. I gently pushed her arms out of the way. Big mistake. My body was lifted off the ground thrown into the sofa. I ended up with my head at an awkward angle, looking at her from upside down.

“But I can make an exception,” I said, rubbing my head. “Why are you so insistent?”

“Because you work too hard,” she said. “In the month and a half I’ve been here, you’ve done nothing but work. Work, work, work, work! There’s more to life than that.”

“How can I be sure that you won’t burn down the entire place?” I said. “When I go back to Twisted Cauldron, will it still be there?”

“Don’t worry. I’m a highly trained professional.”

“That’s…” I followed a learn-as-you-go approach, so Tessa’s training was a little less than complete. Of course, I couldn’t tell her that. Tessa had done an admirable job so far.

“Fine,” I said.

“What?”

“I said I’ll take the day off. Let you and Elise handle it.”

“Wow,” she said, putting her hands to her hip. “You went down easier than I expected.”

Once again, the witch bested me.

Tessa left through the front door at our usual time, leaving me to eat my toast in silence. Most people get two days a week off. I just had to do whatever it is they did for fun. Easy.

I browsed the streaming site that Tessa loves so much. Hundreds of shows about cops, high schoolers, and every other trope under the sun.

None of them interested me. Next step was the movies.

My phone displayed a list of all the currently airing shows as I walked to the strip mall. It was the same strip mall that I took Tessa to. Now that I understood my feelings for Tessa, I couldn't deny that it was anything other than a date.

I stopped in front of the theater, with its neon-lit sign towering dozens of feet above me. Generic Action, Generic Romance, Generic Drama, and Generic Comedy stood before me. None of them immediately appealed to me, leading me to search for more information. The Generic Romance had the best reviews, but I went for the second-best, the Generic Action.

Two hours later, and I was back to where I started: alone and bored. This can't be me. I used to find weekends so exciting. I would play video games until my eyes went numb. Or I would go to a bar with friends. Now I scarcely owned any games and all my friends moved away.

At least I knew coffee would always bring me joy. I made my way to the establishment with the best coffee in town, passed the familiar chime of the door bell.

"Hi," I said.

"What are you doing here?" said Tessa. She crossed her arms and looked down on me, like a friend who disapproved of your habits and knows you tried indulging in them.

"Chill," I said, putting up my hands. "I'm just here for some espresso."

I saw that the café was bustling. Elise was sitting by a table, probably to get a quick break. Everybody looked happy, lively.

"This is your day off. Shoo! Your business isn't wanted here," said Tessa. She turned me around and pushed me out the door.

"This is no way to treat a customer," I said. "I taught you better than that!"

"Well then," said Tessa, leaning up to my ear. Her breath tickled my ear, making me blush. "Do you want me to toss you out like I did this morning, only make it hurt ten times more?"

"Have a pleasant day!" I said, running out of my own business. I went to the second-best coffee shop in town, located a dozen blocks away. It was called the Marigold. As its name suggests, it was a café decorated in

bright yellows and oranges. Painted in the wall behind the cashier were the words “Life is an adventure: go get it!”

It made me grit my teeth.

“Hello,” said the barista behind the register. “How can I help you on this fine day?”

“Can I get a double macchiato, please?”

“Excellent choice, sir! We will bring that right out.”

I paid and even dropped a few dollars into the tip jar. I could recognize good service when I saw it.

While the cashier took another order, a team of baristas behind the counter, all dressed in bright yellow aprons, went to work. An army of potted flowers formed the bulk of the café’s decor, exuding a pleasant aroma.

The coffee was as good as I remember it. It was sugary without sacrificing any of the taste underneath. I looked around, confirming that not much had changed since I last came here.

Since my mother passed away.

It was mid-May and I had just finished my first year as a doctorate student. I had arrived home a few days before. On that day, I accompanied my mom on some errands.

“Why are we here again?” I said.

“You told me you’ve developed a thing for coffee while you were away, so I thought I would bring you to my favorite place in town.”

We sat by a window booth. Her brown hair had been freshly blow-dried while I waited outside, scrolling through my phone. We both held cappuccinos in our hands. I took a sip of mine and had to do a double-take. I didn’t know coffee could be that good.

“You like it?” she said.

“I do. It smells very… flowery in here.”

“That just adds to the appeal, doesn’t it?”

“I guess… Doesn’t Uncle Joe own a café too?” I said. My mom’s hands tensed.

“That’s... I like this one better,” she said.

“Mom, I know you don’t like Uncle Joe all that much. But as the last living member of dad’s family, I think it might be nice to visit once in a while, right?”

I entered dangerous territory. My father died when I was only months old, so I have no recollection of him. His brother, Joe, appeared in my life from time to time, but never for more than a few hours. Bringing up any conversation about my father made her act nervous.

"Why don't we go somewhere else? There's a few more places I want to shop at," she said.

"Don't dodge the question, please," I said. "The last time I suggested we visit Uncle Joe, you flat out said we couldn't do it. Why don't you want me to go to the Twisted Cauldron?"

"You'll understand one day, sweetie. Please don't push this now. Please…"

I balled my hands into fists. I was twenty-two years old. Old enough to know whatever it is I couldn't know. I hated this. Hated not knowing.

"I'm driving back home," I said. "Call me when you're done and I can pick you up."

"That sounds good," she said, relieved that I put the issue to rest. We left the booth and walked our separate ways, unaware that it would be the last time I ever saw her alive.

I stared at the booth, now empty. I pictured my mother and younger self. There were so many things I would say.

I drank the last of my coffee and walked out, leaving the fresh lavender smell behind. I then made my way to the edge of town, to a large plot of land that housed a cemetery. Since my mom was buried here, I only visited it once, on the anniversary of her death. I hadn't changed much by then. Now, however, I felt ready.

I stopped by the tombstone designated for Clara Casilla, my mother. There were a few families milling about, but they were dozens of tombstone rows away. I was alone.

"Good afternoon, mom," I said, biting my lip. "It's been a while. I'm sorry I haven't visited that often. Between work and… That's no excuse. Last time I came here, I told you about how Joe had given me his café to run. He said he needed to attend to some stuff, and that nobody was better at running a coffee shop than a PhD dropout. But now, I think I understand things a little better. Passing the café on to me was a way to inject meaning into my life. The truth is… I've been really lost, mom. For the longest time I thought I was going through the motions, even before you died. Now, though, I think I finally have a purpose.

“You see, I met this girl. She’s really sweet, maybe even to a fault. Her name’s Tessa and she’s a little on the weird side. Uncle Joe gave me the task of taking care of her but I think she’s the one taking care of me. Tessa’s one of the sweetest women I’ve ever met, and by far the most beautiful. She’s been helping me turn the café into something wonderful. It’s so great, mom, that even you might be interested in visiting it. I’ve been with the girl for two months and every day is a new discovery. Just yesterday, I learned that Tessa hates fish. Kind of weird for a girl from Maryland, don’t you think? That made me laugh.

“I miss you a lot,” I said. I couldn’t hold back the tears any longer. They streamed down my face, disappearing into the grass beneath my feet.

“Not a day goes by where I don’t replay the last few minutes we talked in my head. If only I had agreed to stay with you and driven you to the store instead of making you walk. Maybe then you’d… I know I can’t change it, but damn it, do I wish I could. I wish I could’ve acted less like a know-it-all and more like a son. Wish I could’ve given you one last hug. But that was my mistake. I’ll never take another moment for granted any more. I’ve got a lot of friends now, not just Tessa. I hired Elise a few days after we last talked, and she’s been at the Twisted Cauldron ever since. There’s also a few customers that keep a close eye on me, like Don and Julie. I guess what I wanted to say was this: I’ll be fine, mom. Love you, and I’ll see you again soon, OK?”

I turned my back to the tombstone and walked away. The wind had picked up, forcing my hands to take shelter inside my pockets. I saw the sun collide with the mountain of buildings that formed the downtown skyline. I made my way home, anxious to start a new adventure.

Tessa arrived just in time to see me finish hanging a picture on the back wall of my apartment.

“Today was a busy day,” she said, throwing her hat on the dining table.

“Nice to see you survived it,” I said.

“What’s that?” She inched closer, spending several seconds on the portrait. “Is that your mother?”

“Yeah,” I said. Tessa trained her round eyes on me. I didn't need to tell her a thing. She understood my feelings. Come to think of it, she might have understood long before this moment.

“What happened?” she said, turning her face back to the photo behind me.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, your mom was so pretty. Guess you missed out on the gene lottery, Raul.”

“You’re so mean,” I said, flailing my arms over my head. “And after I give you a house and a job. And food too! I haven’t taken it off your paycheck, but I just might start, you know?”

“No!” said Tessa, putting her arms around my waist. “I need the money to buy more dresses!”

“I won’t,” I said. “Tessa?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you want to go on a date with me?”

Chapter 8

“I said I’ll take the day off. Let you and Elise handle it.”

“Wow,” I said, “You went down easier than I expected.”

I left through the front door. It was rough seeing Raul so against the idea of a day off, but it had to be done. Even the most dedicated of witches need time away from their spells, and Raul was no different.

In my short time here, I had come to learn a lot about Raul. He’s a sweet guy, but he’s often far too narrow-minded. His attempt at making alcoholic espresso drinks a few weeks ago just proved it.

I unlocked the store and started setting up all by myself. Sweeping the floor while I was alone gave me a weird sense of ownership. Something like ‘this is mine, so I have to give it my all!’. I wondered if this was how Raul felt every single day of work.

Elise arrived 15 minutes before opening. She tied her curly hair into a bushy ponytail and put on her apron.

“Where’s Raul?”

“I gave him the day off.”

“Did you convince him?”

“Threaten is more like it,” I said, proud of my efforts. Getting Raul to take a day off was no doubt a Herculean task, so there were reasons to celebrate.

“It feels livelier in here already,” said Elise, brandishing a smile.

“Are you excited to visit your sister next week?” I said.

“I am. Amanda’s pretty excited too. She’s promising to show me all New York has to offer.”

“Ah, New York! That’s the place with the tall woman, right?”

“The Statue of Liberty?” said Elise.

“Yeah, her!”

Seemed like I made a mistake. I tried to change the topic as quickly as I could. Better make a mental note to research this Statue of Liberty later since it’s common knowledge.

“So, uh, we expecting a ton of people today?” I said.

“Huh? I don’t see why we would.”

Just as we opened the store, the first stream of customers walked in. I took the counter and cash register while Elise served the orders.

Through countless hours of practice, I mastered the art of point-of-sales systems. I was so sure of myself that I challenged Raul to see who could input a string of customer orders the fastest. I, to nobody's surprise but his own, emerged victorious.

My drink-preparing skills hadn't progressed as much, though. I had only memorized a third of the drink menu, so I had to refer to the laminated guide for help. On days where I felt more confident, I tried to prepare everything without looking at the guide.

"I think there's only one shot in here," said a customer.

"I'm sorry," I said, preparing them a second drink. Today was one of my confident days.

By mid-morning, the rush ended, and we were afforded a break. I was excited that no major catastrophe had taken place yet.

Running the Twisted Cauldron didn't seem particularly difficult. Maybe Raul was one of those people that loved to complain. He did seem like the type, after all.

"I'm going to sit down for a break, alright?" said Elise.

"Sure thing!" I said. She went to the far end of the café, leaving me alone by the counter.

I felt good today. I think I should try my hand at enchanting the coffee a little bit. I mean, Raul never explicitly forbid it. I'd been meaning to ever since I started working here. When no one was looking, I took the lid off the grinder. Hundreds of coffee beans laid still, waiting for their gruesome death at the hands of a machine.

I put my hand over the beans and channeled. I summoned a surge of energy, felt it swirl up through my chest and then to my outstretched hand. A blue light extended from it and seeped into the beans. Once every coffee bean was covered in the blue light, I removed my hand. The spell's flashy light quickly disappeared, but that was to be expected. If all went according to plan, every coffee produced from this batch will be imbued with magic designed to stimulate your taste buds.

I prepared a single espresso for myself, mixing in copious amounts of chocolate powder and a dab of milk. Mixing everything together, I could hardly contain my excitement. Magic and coffee! There's no way those chain stores will run us out of business.

The sip I took was… underwhelming. It didn't taste any different from a regular cup. Did I do something wrong? I thought I had that spell down years ago.

"I noticed that we're missing some napkins," said Elise. I jumped back.

"E-Elise! Hi! Yeah, I can get some."

I didn't get it. The spell should've had me jumping in joy. Instead, all I felt was a mild tingle.

"Here's the napkins," I said, handing the rectangular container to Elise. "I can take the counter."

"Sure thing," she said. "Let me just finish this customer's order."

I watched with horror as the last drop of espresso hit the cup. It came from the batch I enchanted.

"Elise, maybe you shouldn't serve that coffee."

"Why not?"

"Because…" I blanked. Was it really a problem? I had no reaction to the bewitched brew, so maybe it wasn't a problem at all.

A few seconds later, those fears were put to rest.

"This is really good coffee!" said the person Elise just served. He was sitting at a table halfway across the restaurant and yet I heard him clear as day.

One customer had walked in and heard the uproar.

"I'll have what they're having," they said.

"Sure thing," I said. Maybe it did work. Who knows, maybe I just created the greatest espresso drink of all time.

I prepared a caramel macchiato that mirrored what the happy customer got.

"This is actually pretty freakin' good," they said. "You're nothing short of an artist!"

That had me blushing. Finally, my genius was being recognized! A new wave of customers came in, and I was more than happy to serve them some of my bewitched coffee.

"Seems like whatever you brewed up is pretty popular," said Elise. "How'd you make it?"

"Nothing special," I said. "Just put a new mix of beans in there, ha ha."

"Got a name?"

“I call it… Cauldron Premium,” I said.

“Well, I think we have a hit on our hands.”

Word of mouth spread quickly, and by the first half-hour I had made 25 drinks with it. As soon as each customer got their first sip, they went head over heels for it.

“Give me some of that too,” said Elise in between serving orders. I prepared her one cup, which she took a sip out of the next time she came around to pick up an order.

“This is actually pretty good,” she said. “Not too bitter. Very flavorful.”

“Thanks! You’re too kind.”

“Mmm, I think I’m going to sit down over here and drink it,” said Elise.

“Yeah, sure why no—”

I watched as Elise took a seat in an empty table, even though there were orders to be served.

“Uh, Elise…”

“You can take care of them for me,” she said.

“But I have to take their orders,” I said.

“Cool,” she said, sipping on her drink.

There was something wrong with Cauldron Premium. The people who were once jumping in joy were now lethargic, nearly falling asleep on their chairs.

There were orders to take and customers to serve, but the first thing I did was dump out the remaining magic-infused ground coffee. I put new beans in and waited for it to grind them to skinny flakes.

As I waited for it to finish, the door chime went off. Another customer… great. I looked over and saw, to my horror, that it was none other than Raul.

“I’ll be right back,” I told the customer waiting to place their order.

“Hi,” said Raul. He fidgeted his thumbs as he spoke, as if he knew he wasn’t allowed in here. It was really cute.

“What are you doing here?” I said. I crossed my arms, hoping he got the message and turned around.

“Chill,” he said, putting up his hands. “I’m just here for some espresso.”

“This is your day off. Shoo! Your business isn’t wanted here,” I said. I turned Raul around and pushed him out the door. Pressing my hands against his back, I could feel the muscles underneath. Raul wasn’t a particularly muscular guy, but he had a sizeable back.

“This is no way to treat a customer,” he said. “I taught you better than that!”

“Well then,” I said, putting my lips close to his ear. “Do you want me to toss you out like I did this morning, only make it hurt ten times more?”

“Have a pleasant day!” he said. I watched as his butt ran out of the coffeeshop. That’s right. Today I’m the ruler of this kingdom.

Now all I had to do was keep my subjects in line. Easier said than done. I apologized profusely to all the waiting customers and focused on serving the ones that had already paid. Next, I took orders from the people in line, fulfilling their order before moving on to the next customer.

The customers who drank the bewitched brew still had not eased out of their trance. With the customer queue empty, I was finally allowed to think of a way out of this. Some of them had finished their coffee already, so my best bet would be to prepare an antidote and give them even more coffee.

“I’m so tired!” loudly proclaimed one lethargic customer.

“You and me both,” said another.

I separated a small batch of coffee beans, repeating the same enchantment from before. The difficult part was finding a suitable antidote. If I found the correct antidote, I would hear a popping sound as the new spell replaced the old one.

First, I used the spell for taste enhancement, but it didn’t work. Next, I tried spells for removing the effect of other spells. There was a dozen of those in my arsenal. I stood there, trying each. By the time I finished all twelve, I had to swipe the sweat off my temple. Nothing worked.

What could I be doing wrong? Given how none of my spells had worked, I was either using the wrong nullification spells or… Or there was nothing to modify because I had fundamentally changed the coffee beans themselves. I scratched my head.

I could have unknowingly changed the coffee so that it gained properties that would give anyone who ingested it a temporary high,

followed by induced lethargy. That would explain why none of my previous spells worked.

It was worth a shot. I took hold of the jar of beans and channeled through them, embedding each with a spell that could identify the previous spell and nullify it. To my surprise, a low pop sounded out of the jar. Mission accomplished!

I put those in the grinder and prepared two dozen new coffees. My first test subject was Elise.

“Hey there,” I said. She turned to face me at half-speed. Her eyelids were drooping so much they looked like they could slide off at any moment.

“Hi,” she said.

“I got some coffee for you. Here, have a taste.”

I put the coffee cup in her hands. She stared at it for what seemed like hours.

“Do I drink this?” she said.

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s Super Premium Cauldron.”

“Neato,” said Elise right before taking a sip. A few seconds later, her eyes regained their firmness.

“That’s some good stuff,” she said.

“Great,” I said. “Can you help me by giving these out to everyone around? Insist, even if they say no.”

“Uh, sure. I’ll do it.”

Between the two of us, we managed to cure everyone of their lethargy.

“I think I’m due for a break,” I said.

“Yeah, let me see…” Elise looked at her phone’s clock. “Yikes. Did I really take that long of a break? Don’t tell Raul, will you?”

“I won’t,” I said, laughing. “I promise.”

It was all my fault, after all. I slumped on a seat, utterly exhausted.

I wondered how Raul would handle the situation. Knowing him, he probably would’ve given them more coffee, insisting that caffeine would make everything better again. Or he would’ve closed the café and lock himself away in the storage closet while he thought up a solution.

He’s a dork, but his tenacity is admirable. Managing the Twisted Cauldron, offering the drinks he wants to, hiring the people he likes, and giving it his all… It represents everything the witch colony was not. I tried

to use my magic to help people enjoy their coffee more and failed. The key part was that I could try at all.

Inside the colony, magic is an ancient tool that must be used for the benefit of the colony and the benefit of the colony only. Messing around would be punishable. I recognized that what I did might've put people in danger, but…

There's no use. I'm allowed to use magic how I want with little supervision, and I've never been happier.

It's not just the freedom to use magic that I like. Freedom to spend time watching shows and using my money to buy clothes. Freedom to gawk at the handsome guy that slept five feet away from me…

My face blushed. I found my mind wandering to Raul more and more these days. He was geeky but had an undeniable charm to him. I heard him speak and couldn't help but lend an ear and listen. To take his ideas and guide him on the right path… Nothing would make me happier.

The long inner monologue was interrupted by Don and Julie.

"Mind if we sit with you Tessa?" said Don.

"Go right ahead," I said.

"Thank you, dear," said Julie. She sported a red-tinted pin that was as bright as it was beautiful.

"You look tired," said Don. "Raul gotchu workin' too hard? Speaking of the fella… where is he?"

"He isn't in today," I said. "Forced him to take the day off."

"How did you manage that?" said Julie.

"I used some choice words," I said.

"The place already looks livelier," said Don, laughing. Part of it could be the result of the people around us waking up from their enchanted state with a little more energy, but I didn't need to tell him that.

"You look pretty worn out, though," said Julie. "Are you getting enough sleep?"

"Sleep isn't the issue," I said. "But yeah. Today's been hectic."

"Don't work too hard," said Don.

That brooch caught my attention yet again. It was as red as the brightest rose in summer. The blood stone contrasted heavily against Julie's white skin.

"What's wrong, dear? You keep looking at my brooch."

"It's nothing," I said, waving my hand.

“You can tell us,” said Julie.

“It reminds me of my mother is all. Her name was Ruby.”

“I bet she’s a nice woman,” said Julie.

“She was, I think. I never met her.”

“Well, if she could see you know, I’m sure she’d be so proud of you,” said Julie. “I would’ve given anything to have a daughter as sweet and kind as you.”

It surprised me to learn that Don and Julie didn’t have children. I had talked to them nearly every day, and not once did they mention them. Did they ever wonder how their children would look like, if they had any? What they would be doing right now? They were in the opposite position I was, but our concerns were similar.

There are days where I think about my mother, and how different my life would be if she were still around. According to my father, Ruby was the most loyal and considerate witch he knew. She was a woman loved by all, with a heart so big she could never shun anyone. Someone like that wouldn’t let themselves be controlled by the council. They’d give their all, no matter the consequences.

That might’ve been my dad’s bias, but everyone else I asked said the same thing. To have lost someone so wonderful just to give birth to me… It meant that I had to be just as much of a force of good as she was.

To be excellent and passionate in everything I do.

To follow my dreams until the very end.

That is what it means to be Ruby’s daughter.

“Tessa,” said Elise. “The landline. It’s for you.”

I took the cordless phone in my hand and retreated to the back of the restaurant, next to the closet door.

“Hello,” I said.

“Hello, Tessa? This is Minerva.”

I held my breath. Every muscle in my body tensed all at once.

“H-Head Councilwoman,” I said. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“It has come to the attention of one of our sensory witches that you’ve had several magical… let’s call them incidents, the most egregious of which was only a few days into your stay. Such behavior is unacceptable.”

“Head Councilwoman! I apologize for my mistakes. I promise I will be more careful when using magic in the future.”

“We sure hope so. Nevertheless, your time outside of the witch colony will come to an end in one month’s time.”

This couldn’t be happening. Not now. Not when I was enjoying my time here. There was still so much to do. So many places to see. So much to share.

“Pardon me,” I said, lips quivering. “Would it be possible for me to stay here longer? I promise to control my powers more.”

“That will not be possible. Keep in mind, Tessa, that we came to this decision solely on your inability to remain stable in the face of strong emotional readings. Like it or not, you need proper training that you can only receive in the witch colony.”

“When will I be allowed back out?” I said.

“What did you say?”

“I said,” raising my voice, “when will I be allowed to leave the witch colony?”

“You will not, young witch. You will never leave the witch colony again.”

She hung up.

It felt as if my heart would leap out of my mouth. The freedom that I tasted will be gone for good in a matter of weeks. I couldn’t believe it. No, I refused to believe it.

What would Raul say when he found out? It’s not secret that he likes me. Hearing this news will hurt him just as much as it hurt me. He deserved to know as soon as possible.

I spent the rest of the workday in an unshakable melancholy. When it came time to head home, I did so with my eyes pointed at the ground. I got to the door of the apartment I shared with Raul. It took significant effort just to open the door and face him.

He was there. I tried to blurt out the terrifying news I was told a few hours ago, but a lump in my throat prevented me from doing so.

“Today was a busy day,” I said as I threw my hat on the dining table.

“Nice to see you survived it,” said Raul.

My gaze flew past him, to a portrait hung by the wall. It featured a woman and her young son.

“What’s that? Is that your mother?”

“Yeah,” he said.

I caught Raul staring at me. He had a habit of staring, but this time the exercise lasted longer than usual. That was when it hit me. A sense of deep understanding had sprouted within him. From the context, I guessed it had something to do with his mother.

Oh, Raul. I wish I could tell you everything. I wish I could jump into your arms and tell you that everything will be alright. For now, though, all I can do is delay reality as much as possible.

“What happened?” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, your mom was so pretty. Guess you missed out on the gene lottery, Raul.”

“You’re so mean, and after I give you a house and a job. And food too! I haven’t taken it off your paycheck, but I just might start, you know?”

“No!” I said, putting my arms around his waist. “I need the money to buy more dresses!”

“I won’t,” he said. “Tessa?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you want to go on a date with me?”

Chapter 9

“Excuse me?” said Tessa. Her head was tilted, as if I had asked her a difficult question. Not that I blame her. It came out of nowhere.

“Let’s go on a date,” I said. “You and me.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow.”

“What’ll we be doing?”

I hadn’t thought that far. I couldn’t tell her that, however. This was me taking a big, confident step forward. No way in hell could I keep up the illusion if I didn’t know as basic a detail as what the date would be about.

“Does it matter?” I said, lowering the tone of my voice. “I just want to get the chance to know you better.”

“B-but we live together,” she said, pointing to the corner of the apartment that housed the bed and sofa. Considering we work and live in the same tiny space, Tessa and I probably spend more time in close quarters than many other couples do.

“That’s true, but this would be like a step above that,” I said. This was unexpected territory. In my head, she would’ve said something along the lines of ‘Sure, why not’ and that would give me a solid day to plan the actual contents of the date. Her apprehension made me feel like asking might’ve been a mistake.

Tessa didn’t immediately respond. She turned her back to me and put her hand on the table. I guess it wasn’t as easy as yes or no.

“We can do anything you’d like,” I added. “How about the movie theater? You said you wanted to go ever since I first took you to the mall. It’ll be fun.”

No response.

“Listen, Tessa. I understand that this might be a bad idea, considering our current situation. If it doesn’t go well, we can go back to being friends, just like how we started. If it does go well, then who knows what’ll happen. It’s just a first date. We’re not deciding the fate of the world or anything like that.”

Tessa turned around, her face beaming with a wide smile.

“I accept,” she said. “But you can’t just spring big news like this on a girl after she had such a long day at work, you know.”

“I… huh?”

She said yes. Tessa said yes. My heart raced.

“Raul,” she said, waving her hand an inch away from my face.

“Y-yeah?”

“You still haven’t said what we’ll be doing.”

“The movies,” I blurted out.

She tilted her head. I needed to sweeten the deal.

“And ice cream…”

Tessa’s head remained fixed in the same spot. More?

“And shopping…”

Still no movement. There’s only so many hours in the day, Tessa!

“And dinner at a fancy restaurant.”

“There you go,” she said, patting me on the back. “You know, if you asked me this a month ago I would’ve been good with just a movie. Now that I know what dating outside the witch colony looks like, however, I’m far more ambitious.”

After we went to bed, she called out to me.

“Hey, Raul,” she said. “You up?”

“Now I am,” I said.

“I didn’t mean to wake you up. Just wanted to let you know that I’m excited for tomorrow.”

“I’m excited too,” I said from the comfort of my sofa. Tessa had rocked my world, and tomorrow I had the opportunity to understand her even more. I was thrilled.

“This will be my first date,” she said. “So make it count, OK?”

“You got it.”

“...”

“...”

“Is this your first date too, Raul?”

“It’s not,” I said. “Full disclosure, I’ve dated four girls before.”

“That’s so many!” she said. She sat upright on her bed. “Are you some sort of player!?”

“I’m not,” I said. “Go to bed, Tessa.”

I worked the register for most of the day yesterday. Customers floated in and out of the store, made their orders, and went home. It was just like any other day. But if that was the case, then why was I smiling so damn much?

"Hey there, lover boy," said Elise. During one customer arrival lull, she pressed herself against me.

"Hey there, Elise…"

"Tessa's been blabbing about your date all morning," she said. "About how you're going to take her on the best date ever. But, knowing you, you probably said a bunch of stuff that would make her feel good without thinking it through. Am I right?"

"You're right," I said, stone-faced.

"What was that?"

"I don't have a reservation yet," I said. "The three places I want to go are all booked for tonight."

"I'm sure you'll find a way, loverboy. Come to think of it, I've worked for you for a long time and you never asked me out on a date. Why's that?"

Elise sucked in her lip. She usually minds her own business, but I guess even she can't resist the allure of gossip.

"Because then you would've quit and I would have to handle Twisted Cauldron alone. Didn't want to hedge my bets," I said.

"Good answer. Besides, you aren't my type," she said. "You're too uptight."

"Thanks for sharing," I said, grating my teeth.

"I can open up the shop tomorrow, if you'd like. I know you two might be interested in sleeping in, if you catch my drift."

"That won't be necessary," I said, plainly. Elise was making all these assumptions when I haven't even decided what kind of pants I would wear for the date.

I waved to Mr. Johnson as he walked through the door, then went to serve some orders. Don and Julie sat at their favorite table, sharing a newspaper between them.

"Good morning," I said. "Here's your order, with an extra chocolate croissant, on the house."

"You're too kind, dear," said Julie, her white face smiling back.

“Glad we caught you in a good mood,” said Don. “Let us know when you have a date so we can get more free pastries.”

“You know? How?”

Don pointed his finger at Tessa. She was a few tables away, having an animated conversation with a customer. The witch’s smiling face beamed, practically bathing the entire café in its light. I was excited about it, too. Butterflies had fluttered in my stomach ever since I asked her out last night. Felt even better than the days leading up to my first date in high school.

“She’s really excited about it, isn’t she?” I said aloud.

“It’s hard not to smile when you see her so happy,” said Julie.

“Listen boy,” said Don, gesturing me to get closer. “You better not screw this up. If you do, Tessa will be a mess and it’s just a few short hops from that to bankruptcy. Treat her well, alright? We’d hate to come here tomorrow just to see her all sad.”

“Don’t worry Don. I’ll be as respectful as always,” I said.

“Have fun. I know she’s rocked your world, but don’t be too forward about that.”

“Thanks, Don.”

“Women hate it when you say stuff about how you can’t live without them.”

“Thanks, Don…”

“And when you order dinner, don’t be a cheapass and order the least expensive thing on the menu. Order something expensive so that she won’t feel bad for doing the same.”

“Alright Don, thanks,” I said, finally detaching myself from their table.

Mr. Johnson sat at the bar alone. Cupped in his hands was a cappuccino. Its savory smell was soothing and almost made me forget about my previous conversation.

“Nice seeing you here more often,” I said.

“Found myself liking this mid-morning break to your café. Helps me brainstorm. We have a big merger coming up, so I need to be firing on all cylinders,” he said.

“Glad to hear it.”

“Elise told me about your date tonight…”

“Not you too,” I said, groaning.

“It’s cool, man. I’m sure you’re plenty nervous as in, but I’m here to tell you: don’t be. You’ve been hanging out with Tessa for, what, a few months? Think of this as an extension of that. If you go into it thinking this is all-or-nothing, of course you’ll get all scared and make a fool of yourself.”

“So you’re saying I should treat it as any regular Friday night?” I said.

“Exactly,” he said. “What are your plans?”

“I was going to take her to the Wellspring Center,” I said, scratching my nose. “That’s about all I have planned.”

“You’re killin’ me here, Raul. Anything more specific?”

“Shopping, movie, dinner, ice cream,” I said.

“There we go!” he said, clapping his hands together. “Where’s dinner?”

“I haven’t been able to get a reservation,” I said.

“You’re joking.”

“Tried Monroe Grill, Tin Kitchen, and Armaggio’s,” I said.

“Monroe Grill? I think I can help you there,” he said. Mr. Johnson gulped the last of his drink and left it atop its porcelain coaster. He then stepped away from the counter and pulled out his phone. Finding myself with nothing to do, I washed the cup.

“Got it,” he said, knocking on the wooden bar behind me. I turned to see his million-dollar smile.

“You got us a reservation at Monroe Grill? How’d you manage that?”

“Me and the owner go way back. I gotta head out now but be sure to give Tessa some fond memories. Alright, man?”

“Thank you so much,” I said.

“Don’t mention it.”

Mr. Johnson took his suit jacket over his shoulder and waved off, his figure disappearing out the door.

That was a huge relief. I could take care of the rest on my own. Don’t worry, Mr. Johnson. I’ll be sure to give Tessa the best first date a witch could ask for.

The walk back after work was strangely silent. I tried to break the ice, but Tessa fidgeted her fingers and spent most of the walk deep in

thought.

"Everything OK?" I said, unlocking the front door.

"Y-yeah," she said. "Just thinking about what I should wear."

"The whole way over here? It took you that long to decide?"

"I see you didn't put much thought into it," she said, giving me the shoulder. "I'll be changing in the bathroom."

It was time to make my move. I quickly changed into my button-up and sleek black slacks, not even bothering to close the windows. Put a light jacket on for good measure. I needed to be quick if I wanted to pull this off. I raced back to the same street the Twisted Cauldron was on. The streetlamps were lit, their lights reflecting off the closed shops around. The flower shop next to our café had its door open.

"Hello Maria," I said.

"Hello dear," she said. Her veiny fingers were wrapped around a large arrangement of colorful flowers. "Your orders' just about ready."

Out came a young woman holding a bouquet of roses. She was the splitting image of Maria if Maria were 30 years younger.

"You're looking handsome," said Maria's daughter.

"Thanks," I said.

"Are you going out with that new girl?" said Maria.

"The one with the funny hat?"

"Shush Alejandra," said Maria, wagging her finger at her daughter. "We don't judge people by the size of their hats."

"Thanks to both of you, but I really have to go," I said. I swiped my credit card and flung out the door. I modulated my speed to minimize sweating, but I could still feel the droplets accumulating over my temple.

I arrived at the front door of my own apartment, gasping for breath. It took a second for me to regain my composure. Back straight. Chest out. You're ready, Raul. I knocked.

"Who is it?" called Tessa from the other side.

"Who else?" I said.

She opened the door and gasped.

"Are those for me?" she said.

"They are," I said. "Happy first date."

As soon as I heard myself say that, I cringed. Tessa was still fixated on the flowers. I held them out. The flowers rose from my hands and into the open space in front of Tessa. She put her nose to them and smiled.

“It smells really good,” she said. “I can’t believe you went through all this trouble.”

“You’re worth it.”

She potted the roses, giving me a chance to admire her outfit. Tessa wore a tight blouse, tucked into the skirt that I bought her many weeks ago. She had on flawless dark eyeliner and red lipstick.

“You look beautiful,” I said. I wanted to record this moment and keep it in my head forever. The vision of Tessa blushing at my comment. Of her pristine smile, so genuine that it erased all the doubt in my heart.

There was a short pause where neither of us said anything. We stood there, cheeks blushed, staring at the ground.

“You ready?” I said.

“Where to? Sample place as last time?”

“There’s another place called the Wellspring Center. It has a ton more exciting stuff.”

“How many shopping centers do you need?” she said. I didn’t have the heart to tell her that she lived in the country with the highest amount of retail space per capita.

We stepped outside, where the ride-share vehicle I asked for minutes before had just arrived.

“Raul, why is the car just standing there? No one’s getting in or out,” she said.

“We’re getting in,” I said. “I ordered it.”

“You what? Why do we need a car?”

“It’s too far away to walk,” I said. “And I ordered it from my phone.”

I opened the door of the black sedan, letting Tessa in first. Then I went around and got in.

“I still can’t believe your phone ordered a car,” she said. The car got out of the urban area we were in and onto the highway. It raced down at dozens of miles an hour.

“We should use a car more often,” said Tessa.

“Plenty of people use cars to get around,” I said.

“Then why don’t you have one? Is it because you’re cheap?”

“I… uh… Yes.”

“Figures,” said Tessa, shaking her head.

“Hey! You have no idea how expensive it is to own a car in the city,” I said, but it fell on deaf ears. Tessa had her eyes glued to the window.

“How did you arrive in the city in the first place?” I said. It was a question that had popped into my head once every few days, but I never found the right moment to ask.

“Joe drove me,” she said.

“He what?” I said.

“He dropped me off in front of Twisted Cauldron.”

“So you’re saying that Uncle Joe drove you all the way from Maryland and he didn’t even bother to step out and say hello? That means that when I called him he was probably still in the car!”

Man, Uncle Joe was a real ass sometimes. To not even say hi to your nephew when he’s a few feet away. That’s cold.

“We’re here,” said the driver. Tessa and I stepped out into a large roundabout. Greeting us was a large round fountain with statues of turtles spread across it.

“They’re so cute!” she said, jogging over. One of the bronze turtles was jutting out of the water just enough to touch it. Tessa put her hand over its head and pet it.

“Do you want a picture?” I said.

“Of me?”

“Both of us,” I said. I took my smartphone and opened the camera application. Tessa and I were projected onto its screen.

“That’s so cool,” she said. We both posed, taking several pictures.

“What’s the plan?” said Tessa.

“There’s still some time before the movie starts, so I figured we could look around for a little bit. Then movie, then dinner. Finish the night with some ice cream. Sound good?”

“Sounds perfect,” she said, taking hold of my hand.

Tessa led me by the hand throughout the center. At first we didn’t have a set plan, but as soon as we went to the map she knew where to go.

“Why the candle store?” I said as Tessa led me inside a store lined with pastel colors. Hundreds of different candles came together to give the store a unique smell. The store sold other things too, like anniversary cards and other trinkets that one would get their mom or grandmother on their birthday, but Tessa wasn’t interested in any of that. She went up to the sole employee in the shop.

“Do you have any pumpkin-scented candles?” said Tessa.

“In the middle of summer?” said the employee. When Tessa didn’t respond, she went behind the counter and searched their systems. “Seems like we might have some in stock. I’ll be right back.”

“Witches and pumpkins are a thing?” I said. I could hardly contain my laughter. To me it seemed like the popularity of witches and pumpkins evolved in tandem with Halloween.

“Yes,” said Tessa, puffing her chest. “Pumpkins are known to have certain properties that make it easier for witches to cast spells.”

“Is that true?”

“I have three different kinds in stock,” said the employee. Tessa went over to thoroughly check them. I was still hung up on the whole pumpkins-are-magic comment. Would their smell be magical too? How much pumpkin concentrate do you need for these properties to take effect? If I eat enough pumpkin, will I turn orange before I turn magical? So many questions.

“I’ll pick this one,” said Tessa, pointing to the one in the middle.

“Alright, I’ll ring that up.”

“I can pay for it,” I said, pulling out my wallet.

“Don’t worry about it Raul,” said Tessa, smiling. “I can pay for it.”

Tessa took out a small wallet from a handbag and paid it off in cash.

“So,” I said as we left the store. “Are pumpkins magical or not?”

“What time does the movie start?” she said.

“It’s—oh, crap! It starts in like 5 minutes.”

We nearly sprinted to the movie theater. The long line just made things worse. By the time we got to the ticket window, it was a few minutes past the start.

“Can we get two tickets for the 6:45 PM showing?”

“Those are sold out, sir.”

“That’s… OK,” I said. Internally, however, I felt utterly defeated. I should’ve bought them online and sucked up the $2 transaction fee.

“We can’t watch it?” said Tessa.

“Yup. Any other movie you’d be interested in?”

Tessa was able to see the movie posters of all available movies in the screen above us. Within a few seconds, she made her decision. It was the Generic Drama that I made the conscious decision of not watching

yesterday. The poster featured a woman solemnly looking out a window into the cityscape.

"Is it OK if I pay for the tickets?" I said.

"No, I can—wait, how much are they?" She retreated her hand from her purse and urged me to continue. I bought them, and we headed up.

"Want to buy any popcorn? There's still a few minutes before the trailers start."

"I'm not hungry now. Rather save it for dinner. What are trailers?"

"They're advertisements," I said. "For movies and other events."

"How interesting," she said. "We should do that. Put advertisements in our coffee."

"How would we manage that?"

"Maybe putting our logo at the bottom of their cup!" said Tessa.

"So that they're reminded of the restaurant they're currently sitting in?"

"You don't have to be so negative about it," she said, pouting.

"If pumpkins are as magical as you say they are, then maybe we should just sprinkle some of that on there," I said, laughing.

After the ticket-taker made sure that Tessa wasn't hiding a camera on her hat, we went to our theater. At around 120 seats, it was one of the smallest theaters they had. To Tessa, however, it was the leviathan of movie theaters.

"This is so huge!"

"You haven't seen anything yet. When we come see a new release, we'll be inside one of the bigger theaters."

"How sly of you Raul," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Implying that we're coming here again. The first date isn't over and you're already thinking of a second one."

"I wasn't…"

She got me there.

The theater was empty. Tessa and I took our seats in the upper middle rows. Even after the trailers finished, there wasn't a single other person in the room. I imagined the movie was on the tail-end of its theater run, but to be completely alone was surreal.

"No one else is here," I said.

"Does that mean we can fool around?"

“T-Tessa? What do you mean?”

Tessa held out her hand. The lights surrounding us turned from yellow-white to red, then blue, and finally green.

“So that’s what you mean,” I said.

“Shh! The movie’s about to start,” she said. Never mind the fact that there was no one else in the theater.

“Could you turn the lights back?” I said. The green made it feel like I was in the middle of some Christmas party.

“Oops, sorry.”

The movie opened with the scene of a young woman looking out her window. The people she looked down on were like ants, scurrying around in the rain. For most of her life, she had been a prisoner of that place. The gatekeeper, her mother. While rummaging around the house, however, she finds a letter from her recently-deceased father. The letter told her to explore the world, to escape the clutches of her mother. The woman decides to do just that, sneaking past her mother and descending for the first time in years.

While exploring the city after sunset, she befriends a young man. He shows her the ways of the city and its many sights, but it becomes increasingly clear that her body is weakening. As dawn breaks through, she reaches her apartment only to collapse and die on the front steps.

As the credits played, Tessa sobbed.

“That was so… beautiful,” she said, wiping her tears away. “The way she… And how he… Do all movies here make you cry like that?”

“Not all of them,” I said. “Some try to make you laugh.”

“You didn’t like the movie?”

“I did, yeah…”

The truth was that I thought it was a little too melodramatic. It’s the kind of film targeted towards women 14 to 20 years old. Tessa was a little out of that age range, but it affected her just the same.

The lights turned back on, and Tessa’s crying settled into quiet sobbing. As I was about to get up, she turned to me and put her hand on mine.

“You wouldn’t let me die like that, right?” I tensed up. Why would she ask me something like that?

“Of course not,” I said. “If you died I would have to hire someone else, and that’s so much paperwork.”

“You’re so mean!” she said, shooting out of her seat and hustling out of the theater. I followed along.

Dinner at Monroe Grill was delicious, but Tessa barely talked. Even after we got our food, she ate in silence without so much as a comment.

“How are your beef medallions?” I said.

“They’re good…” she said, putting the last one in her mouth.

“Is there something wrong?”

“No,” she said.

“Is it because of the comment I made earlier?”

“The thing about having to hire someone else? No, it has nothing to do with that.”

“Then what is it? If you don’t mind me asking, that is,” I said.

“Yesterday, I… got a call from someone back in my witch colony.”

“Is that what has you upset?” I said. Tessa never mentioned her family, so it was possible that she just didn’t get along with them.

She nodded.

“I get that way when Uncle Joe calls me sometimes,” I said. “He never calls to say hello or anything nice like that. It’s always ultra-specific things that make little sense. One time, he told me to serve a double-shot macchiato to a man wearing a bright green tie. A few minutes later, boom, someone with a green tie showed up.”

I complained, but the truth is that I was eternally grateful to Joe for everything he did for me. He gave me a job and believed in me enough to let me run the business. Most of all, he led me straight into Tessa.

We then ventured through the sidewalk some more, before arriving at a small ice cream parlor. Nearly three dozen flavors of ice cream and a dozen different ways to deliver them. Tessa put her fingers to the glass and gawked.

“There’s so many different kinds of ice cream here,” she said.

“Anything in particular you’re interested?” I said.

“How many can I get?”

“As many as you want.”

“Excuse me!” she said, calling for the attention of the clerk. “Could I have a scoop of dulce de leche and… one scoop of triple chocolate fudge-fudge?”

“Would that be all, miss?” he said.

“I can get more?” said Tessa.

“Sure can,” he said.

“In that case… I’ll get one scoop of that velvet moon ice cream and another scoop of triple chocolate fudge-fudge!”

The four scoops were assembled inside a large waffle cone. I wasn’t as ambitious and only ordered two scoops on a regular cone. Tessa watched with bated breath as I paid for the dessert.

“Here you go,” said the clerk. Tessa grabbed her waffle cone and admired it for a few seconds before digging in.

“It’s so good,” she said.

We sat on a creaky wooden table just outside the shop window. There were many other couples strolling around. Not many guys could say they knew a witch. Fewer still could say they had a date with one. Tessa smiled as she ate more ice cream, her mind fully submerged in the mountain of sugar in front of her. Maybe something about witches made them like sweets more.

“What are you thinking about?” she said.

“Not much… Just thinking about you,” I said.

“Only good things, I hope,” said Tessa. The witch flashed a smile, but it quickly faded.

“Only good things.”

She had come out of the movie significantly less lively. Just a few hours ago, our conversations were funny, her reactions over the top. Now it all felt muted. A breeze bellowed through the street, causing Tessa to shiver.

“You can take my jacket,” I said, as if by instinct. I got up and placed it around Tessa.

“Thanks,” she said, putting it on. “You’re too nice to me.”

“That’s not true. I could crack way fewer jokes at your expense.”

“That’s your way of showing you care… I think.”

“No need to rationalize it,” I said, licking off the last of my ice cream. “You’re an easy target sometimes… but you’ve gotten harder to make fun of. Can’t believe how fast you adapted to life here.”

“It’s been hard at times, I admit, but I’ve had so much fun here. Coming here and meeting you was really a blessing.”

“Hey, hey. Don’t be so melodramatic with me. You’re making it sound like a goodbye.”

Tessa finished her ice cream and put her fingers over mine. As soon as she did, I became acutely aware of it. It was like my hand was perched

on some precarious valley, and any sudden movement would tumble me one way or another.

Instead, she moved for me. Tessa pried open my fingers and wove hers between mine.

"Tessa…"

"Tell me about your next grand scheme," she said with a twinkle in her eye. "Are you going to invite some famous novelist? Maybe entice customers with some alcohol?"

"I don't want a repeat of what happened with you, so alcohol is a no-go for now. As for inviting someone… I'm thinking of doing some end-of-summer thing."

"Like what?" she said.

"I emailed one guy. He hit the bestseller list with his debut mystery novel a few weeks ago and I think he's local. Might work out. We'll see."

"Oh yeah? It sounds like a lot of fun."

"It will be. And with you helping me plan it, there's no way it won't be amazing. Now that I know all the wonderful magic stuff you can do! We'll give 'em a real show… if that's OK with you, of course."

Tessa laughed.

"Of course it would be fine with me," she said. "It's a little funny how you used to be so against me using magic, but now you're personally asking me to use it."

"That's because I only just recently realized how important using magic was to your identity. We still can't let other people find out, but if nobody sees you there's no harm in it, right?"

"Right…" she said, averting her gaze to the center of the table.

"Hey, Tessa?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you mind if I ask you about your home? What's it like living in a witch colony? How are your parents like? Can men also use magic?"

"So many questions," she said, curling her mouth into a smile. "Let's see… the witch colony is in this far-off place in the middle of the countryside. It's protected by an invisible barrier spell that makes it so that only those who are loved by a witch inside of the colony may enter. Inside, it's a beautiful community filled with thatched roofs and groomed gardens and… I'm boring you, aren't I?"

"Not at all," I said. "Please keep going."

I wanted to learn everything I could about you, Tessa. And it starts with where you're from.

"It's, ah… It's pretty. Life is fun, relaxing. But not many people choose to leave it. Let's see… You asked about my parents, right? My mom passed away giving birth to me, and my dad's something of a loner, haha…"

"I'm sorry," I said. I tightened my grip on the girl's hands. She squeezed back.

"It's OK," she said. "Can't miss what you never had, right?"

I remained silent. Not having a mother… No, at least I had mine for two decades. Tessa and I don't share that much in common. It would be stupid of me to suggest that.

"As for your last question, I don't think so. There's men in the colony, of course, but they tend to the farms, the shops, and do everything but magic."

"Are you saying there's no way I could learn how to operate an espresso machine with my mind?" I said.

"Sadly not," she said, laughing. "You're really cute, you know that?"

"I'm cute?" I said. I wasn't expecting her to be so forward. "N-not as cute as you, though!"

I tried to play it off as smooth so much I ended up shouting it out, alerting nearby pedestrians. I'm sorry for being such a dork!

Tessa looked more at ease than she did a few minutes ago. Her shoulders slacked, and I could tell she wasn't forcing her smile anymore. Maybe it was the ice cream. Or maybe it was me. All I know is that I was enjoying myself.

"It's getting a little late," I said, checking the time on my phone. "I'd hate to call it off, but we have to get up early tomorrow."

Part of me wanted to call Elise up right away and take her up on her offer, but that wouldn't be fitting of a manager.

"It's OK," she said. "I understand."

We waited by the curb for the drive-share person to pick us up. Our hands were locked together. Tessa brought her body close to mine. I could smell her perfume. I became clinically aware of every breath she took.

"You haven't talked much about your power," I said, trying to break the silence.

“And what is it that you want me to tell you? I mean, I can tell you that I understand the way you’re feeling right now…”

She slid her free hand down my stomach but stopped just short of the belt. The move sent shivers down my spine. I’m sure Tessa could sense that, too.

“Not me! Other people, I mean.”

“Hmm,” she said, tapping a finger on her lips. “See those women over there?”

She pointed to a group of two women leaving a bar across the street. One of them stumbled as she walked, using the other woman as support.

“The drunk one has these very raw feelings of love. Her lover broke up with her recently, but enough time has passed that she’s beginning to understand why he split off. So, she’s getting drunk not because she got dumped, but because she can’t accept the fact that the problem might’ve been hers all along. Maybe addiction? I’m not sure.”

“The other woman faces conflicting feelings. She wants to support her friend but feels as if she can’t do it in this way. Something happened to her recently that changed how she fundamentally feels about things like this. Maybe it was the birth of a child, or maybe it was a job promotion. She’s too grown up for this.”

“That was impressive,” I said. To call it impressive would be a severe understatement. Tessa can grasp things about this world that I could never even dream of understanding. It really makes me think that she might understand me on a much deeper level than I understand her. Maybe that was why she was so open with sharing details of her past. It’s her way of helping me catch up.

You’re amazing, Tessa. Too amazing for someone like me.

Our drive back was much faster than the drive over earlier in the evening. As the car pulled up next to the apartment, I got nervous all over. In any normal first date, you walk the girl up to her door and say goodnight, maybe get a kiss out of it. But Tessa lives in my apartment already. We’ve spent more time together than any two people who go on a first date should have.

I fumbled to put the key through its hole. I expected Tessa to make some comment about how I was taking too long, but she remained strangely quiet. She must be having just as hard a time as me processing what we do next.

“That was a lot of fun,” I said. “We should do it again sometime.”

Straightforward and friendly, pushing away any expectation on my part.

“I’m not done with you,” she said, putting both hands on my shirt. Tessa brought me closer to her. Closer to her face. I closed my eyes and…

We kissed. Tessa’s soft lips met mine. A barrage of fireworks exploded around in my head. Our lips parted, and I took a moment to appreciate her beautiful face. Rosy cheeks, purer than the mightiest diamond. Sleek brown hair that melted around my fingers.

“That wasn’t so hard, now was it?” she said.

I went in for another kiss. It took a moment for Tessa to react. She reached out and wrapped her arms around my back. Slowly I guided her to the sofa, tossing aside the sad excuse for a blanket that I use as a bed sheet. I put my arms around her waist and could feel the tension escape her body.

We breathed in sync. Short, ragged breaths punctured the silence of the apartment. No lights were on, but at that moment there was nothing brighter than Tessa. With her, the Twisted Cauldron was a distant dream. The worries of everyday life were lost in her sunlight.

Tessa leaned forward, pushing my head to the sofa seat. Her body climbed over mine, and before long, her lips were pressed against mine. Delicate fingers caressed my cheeks, plunging me further into her spell. Love was the most potent witchcraft of all, and I was an easy victim.

“Tessa, I…”

And just as quickly as it started, it stopped. Tessa pulled away, brushing back the strands of hair that had gotten misplaced in the last few minutes.

“I’ve been hiding something from you,” she said, now sitting on the other end of the sofa.

“What is it?” I said, bracing for the worst.

“The call yesterday, it was from the witch council at my colony. They’re ordering me to go back.”

This can’t be happening. I waited to make sure it wasn’t some ill-timed joke, but the punchline never came.

“You’re not serious, are you?” I said.

“I am,” she said, putting her hand to her forehead. “I am being serious.”

“Why would they make you return? Wasn’t this supposed to be a learning experience? There’s so much for you to learn still.”

I wasn’t lying, but I was hiding my true feelings. You can’t leave, Tessa.

“I don’t know,” she said. “They didn’t want to say, even after I asked them.”

“Do you… do you want to go?”

She paused. She knew that whatever she said would impact my feelings. Don’t do this Tessa, not for my sake.

“I don’t want to. I want to stay here with you.”

As she said that, the bundle of knots in my heart eased up. Enough to let me breathe again, at least.

“But I don’t have a choice,” she continued. “Even if I say no, they have ways of forcing me. These are witches with power beyond your wildest imaginations, Raul. They could tear up half the city looking for me.”

“I want you to stay,” I said. “I know it’s not fair of me to ask this of you, but please stay.”

She’s not your lover, Raul. I knew I wasn’t in any position to ask this of her, but it pained me to see her go. Three minutes ago, we were locked in an embrace. Now I found out I might never see her again.

“I can’t do this, Raul,” she said, wiping away a tear. “I want to stay here with you but it’s out of my control. I’ll be leaving in a month.”

Tessa left the sofa and moved to the kitchen. Her teardrops turned into steady streams. I could barely contain my own emotion, either.

“I know you want me to stay. I know you’d… You’d let them destroy the Twisted Cauldron if it meant protecting me. But I can’t!”

I was an idiot. Tessa understood how I felt just as much as I understood myself. Caught between a rock and a hard place, and here I was, pushing the rock.

“I’m sorry,” I said, putting my hand on her back. “Sorry for being so inconsiderate.”

“I need to leave.”

Tessa headed towards the door. I pulled on her wrist.

“I’ll go,” I said, grabbing my keys and wallet. “You stay here tonight. By yourself.”

“Go where?” she said.

“To the café. I’ll sleep there.”

“In the floor of the storage room? You’ll catch a cold.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said. “Take it easy tonight, alright? Call me if there’s anything wrong.”

I left through the door without a second thought.

Half an hour later, I settled into the storage closet of the Twisted Cauldron, eating a granola bar I got from a 24/7 convenience store on my way here. I found a comfy corner and settled in. For hours my mind wandered to alternate futures, to worlds where Tessa could stay with me. I knew I was in over my head. I knew that my relationship with Tessa went back less than three months. But, despite that, I understood that losing Tessa would mean losing a part of myself in the process.

Chapter 10

I was woken up by tapping on the door. I picked up my groggy self and unlocked the door, finding myself face-to-face with Tessa. She was dressed in her work clothes and looked as determined as ever.

“You don’t need to come today,” I said. “You can go home.”

“This is my job, Raul. Now let me through.”

The witch then dropped a plastic bag in my hands. It had a bundle of clothes, along with a toothbrush and toothpaste.

“Figured you’d like these,” she said.

“You went through my underwear drawer?” I said.

“I rummaged through far more than that,” said Tessa, laughing. She patted me on the shoulder and went to work, taking down the chairs from their tables.

At least she hadn’t lost her sense of humor. I observed her for the rest of the hour. She diligently checked to make sure everything was stocked and that every table was spotless. I, on the other hand, couldn’t get the fact that she was leaving out of my head. How could I have been so stupid? It was so obvious throughout our date.

Don’t do this to yourself, Raul. Tessa only has a few weeks left with you. Make the best of it.

“I’ll take the counter for the morning, OK?” said Tessa. I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t suck in my feelings.

“Can we at least talk about yesterday?” I said, desperate to say anything to her.

“We can’t,” said Tessa. “Not here. It’s almost opening.”

With those words, Tessa made sure she wouldn’t hear anything else about that from me for the rest of the workday.

Halfway through the morning, I took a short break sitting by one of the empty tables. Tessa had been taking orders and preparing them at a surprising rate, giving me the opportunity to take quick breaks like this.

“It’s nice to see Tessa all fired up,” said Elise as she took a short break next to me. “The café has been a lot busier ever since she got here, don’t you think?”

I knew that was the case. I meticulously studied the weekly sales reports. For all my attempts at getting new ideas rolling, the café's sales had stagnated for the last six months. After Tessa showed up, the café bucked the trend. Now there were more people visiting the Twisted Cauldron at all hours of the day.

"Yeah," I said. "She's been a real asset."

"You don't look too good," said Elise. "Date didn't go well?"

"It went great, but… Turns out she's leaving at the end of the month. To go back home."

"For good!?" said Elise.

"I think so."

"I'm so sorry, Raul. I know you really like this girl." Elise put her hand on my shoulder and gave it a light squeeze.

"Thank you for the support," I said.

"Hey, slackers! We have an order for table 14 over here!" said Tessa.

"Comin' right up," I said on instinct. The rest of the working hours went by quickly. I tried to leave my feelings behind and focus solely on the job. Even tried experimenting with new coffee bean mixes during my downtime. Despite my best efforts, however, I couldn't stop thinking about Tessa.

Every couple of minutes I found myself glancing in her direction. Her focus was unyielding. She danced from table to table, the end of her plucky hat bobbing with every step. The customers smiled at her and she returned the gesture.

In those moments I wished I had her powers. To be able to understand how she was feeling and find the best reply. I stopped myself before taking that line of reasoning any further. Even with the knowledge of how someone was feeling, I wouldn't be able to offer any more help. Tessa's been reading people all her life. I couldn't come close.

When it came time to close the shop, Tessa and I worked independently to tidy the café. As soon as the last spot was washed off, I spoke up.

"I think I'll stay here tonight," I said.

"You don't have to do this," she said. "Come home."

"You need your space, right?"

“Don’t assume what I want, dammit!” said Tessa. She slammed her right hand down. Her eyes narrowed and locked with mine. I had never seen her so confident before. The witch took another step.

“I’m sorry,” I said in a soft tone.

“Stop apologizing! Stop beating yourself to death over me! Stop being so… so… so weak!”

Her words cut through my bones like a knife through paper. A switch flipped inside me. I couldn’t hold it in any longer.

“And what? You’re strong because you use your magic to understand how people think? You think that’s OK? That you can see into people’s emotions like that? Well, Tessa, you’re the one who thinks you understand, but you really freakin’ don’t. I was just fine until you came along! Then you fucked me over.”

That was a lie. I wasn’t fine until she came along. I thought I was. It was only after Tessa came along that I realized exactly how lonely I was.

“You don’t mean that,” said Tessa.

“If being weak means that I’m going to miss you, then I’m the weakest guy in the entire planet. If being weak means that I’m going to miss that smiling face, then that’s what I am! But you can’t do this to me. You can’t come in here, make me fall for you, and then up and leave. You can’t…”

Tears dropped onto the hardwood floor in front of me. Before I could react, she put her arms around me.

“Come home,” she said. “I want you there with me.”

The two of us walked home holding hands, dragging our feet on the way there.

I kissed her as soon as I locked the door behind me. She returned the feeling. We kissed on the bed, her hot breath breaking me down. We spent the rest of the night curled in each other’s arms.

“Tessa,” I said. The witch’s eyes flickered, half-conscious. She worked extra hard today. No wonder she was more tired than usual.

“Hm?”

“I can’t visit you, can I?” I said.

“I want you to,” she said, stifling a yawn. “But we can’t. Having an outsider come into the colony would be unprecedented.”

“I thought so,” I said. I just had to accept it. Within a few weeks, Tessa would be gone for good.

Chapter 11

The next morning, I woke to find Tessa changing out of her pajama shirt in front of me. Her upper half was bare, exposing skin even whiter than that on her face.

"Sorry for staring," I said as I turned my head away.

"Go ahead," said Tessa. "We're all adults here, right?"

"Right," I said, putting my feet on the ground. Being an adult means knowing when to give up. Seeing her act as if this is the next stage in our relationship… I would be lying if I said it didn't hurt. We're moving into a brick wall is all.

"OK, now your staring is starting to get a little creepy," said Tessa.

"Oh, sorry. Was thinking of something else."

"Unbelievable," said Tessa, pouting. She put her hands on her hips. "A half-naked woman and you're stuck inside your head."

"I don't think I've ever known anyone who takes so long to change their shirt," I said with a smile. "Finish the job so we can head out."

On our walk to the café, Tessa edged closer and closer until we were shoulder to shoulder. Next thing I knew, we were holding hands.

We opened the Twisted Cauldron like we had done dozens of times before. The smell of freshly brewed espresso helped calm my nerves.

"You two seem chipper," said Elise. She walked in on the two of us only a foot apart behind the counter.

"Everything's good," said Tessa.

"Yeah," I said. "Same here."

"There's something weird going on here… but I don't care enough to find out," said Elise. She put on her apron and shuffled into the storage closet.

"Should we tell her you're leaving?" I said.

"No… not yet," said Tessa. "I don't want to bother her."

The first customers of the day were Don and Julie. Don came in with a walking stick, something I'd never seen him carry before.

"New toy?" I said.

"I'll smack ya over the head with it if you keep talking like that," said Don. He raised his cane over his head. It made him lose his balance,

but I managed to grab onto his shoulders before he could tumble forward.

"Oh goodness," said Julie. "You have to be more careful honey. The doctor finally convinced him to get it yesterday."

"I don't need it," said Don.

"Careful Don," said Tessa, holding onto his other arm. "I'm sure you'll have plenty of opportunities to smack Raul over the head once you're sitting down."

"Ah, you're right, Tessa. Your smile calms my old weary heart. And now that your coffee is as good as this guy's, you don't really need him, now do you?"

"Ouch Don," I said, only half-kidding. "I'll be sure to pick a new favorite customer that knows how to walk."

"Quiet down, you two," said Julie.

"Thank you, Julie," I said. "You're my favorite."

"I know, dear," she said, winking.

Tessa didn't seem to have any intention of telling anyone else about her leaving. A part of me thinks that she won't tell anyone, forcing me to deal with the fallout. You can't do that, Tessa. People here care about you.

"Raul!" said Tessa from behind the counter. "We're all out of the chocolate croissants. Can you go get some from the back?"

"Sure thing," I said. I served Don and Julie their drinks in porcelain cups. Don, as promised, tried to take a swing at my head with the cane.

"Maybe next time," he said, laughing. I turned and headed back to the storage room.

A sharp crack echoed across the room. I turned to see Julie falling to the ground. Her body hit the floor with a loud thud.

"Julie!"

I ran to her side, surrounded by gasping customers.

"What's going on?" said Elise.

"Honey?" said Don, trying his sharpest to crouch down next to her. "Julie?"

"I think she might've had a heart attack," I said. I'm not a doctor, dammit!

"I'll call 911," said Elise.

"Sounds good," I said.

I checked Julie's pulse, but there was no response. No signs of breathing, either.

“They’ll be here in a minute,” said Elise.

I put the CPR training I had to use. I tried and tried, with nothing to show for it.

“Damn!” I shouted, stepping away from the scene.

All around us were somber faces. Men and women were crowding in a circle. Some were biting their lips, others shaking their heads.

“Please give her some room, everyone,” I said, gesturing people to step back.

Elise stood by Don, putting her hand on his shoulder. The poor man was nearly shaking in place. You can’t die yet, Julie. Don needs you.

In the minutes between the incident and the ambulance showing up, Julie showed no signs of life. As they loaded Julie onto a stretcher, I went over to Don.

“Please call us with any updates,” I said, giving Don a hug. The old man’s eyes were even more sunken than usual.

“I will, boy… I will.”

Inside the Twisted Cauldron, its clientele had returned to their seats. Elise took customer orders with a worried expression.

“How was he?” she said.

“Pretty shaken up,” I said. “Told him to call me with any news. I’m no doctor, but… Well, let’s wait for news.”

I looked around but found one obvious piece of the café puzzle missing.

“Where’s Tessa?”

“I don’t know,” said Elise. “Haven’t seen her at all since it all started.”

“I need to go find her,” I said.

She was inside the storage closet, tucked away in the most cramped corner of the room. Boxes of recyclable cups and plastic toppers surrounded the girl, sitting with her leg between her knees.

“Tessa…”

“It happened again, Raul. Dozens of people, all reacting to an emergency. I could feel all the anxiety, understand all the pain…”

“Tessa, I'm sorry. Is there anything I could do?”

I slowly approached her.

“Stay away from me!” she shouted, stopping me in my tracks. “It’s too much, Raul. Too much. Do you know what Julie felt in the moments

before she died? She felt, above everything else, regret that she would leave her husband behind. It came faster than she was expecting. Julie wasn't ready."

"We don't know if she's gone for sure," I said.

"She is! I couldn't feel anything from her anymore. The spark of life was gone, Raul. And Don…" said Tessa, gripping the shirt over her chest. Her breathing became laborious. "He's so lost right now. A void that just keeps on getting bigger and bigger."

"It's going to be OK, Tessa," I said, rushing to give her a hug. "It's going to be OK."

"Raul…" said Tessa. Her tears dropped down to my shoulder. "I can't handle this!"

"Do you want me to take you back to my apartment?"

"And do what?" said Tessa, "stay in there forever? Or until the witches come and get me?"

"I don't mean…" I said. I don't know what I mean. I don't know what to think anymore.

"Not sure how much more of this I can take," said Tessa.

"I'll be more careful about things like this," I said, plainly aware of how impossible that would be.

"You can't block out the world for me, Raul," she said.

"Is that what you want? To block out everyone's feelings?"

"Yes… No… I don't know, Raul! I don't know. All I know is that I have this pounding headache and all these negative feelings are assaulting my head. If I let up for just a second… If I stop fighting… I might go down a hole I'll never come out of."

"I'll be here to—" but I stopped myself before continuing. Me being here is of no help to her. I can't do anything to stop Tessa from having these feelings. I'm at a loss.

Tessa cried on my shoulder for what seemed like hours. When Tessa felt ready, we left the storage closet. Elise, swamped between serving food and taking orders, was about to say something, but she held her tongue. I think it was the sight of a cried-out Tessa that did it.

"You can rest for the rest of the day. If you feel like going home, here's the key."

"Thanks," said Tessa. I gave her a mocha, which she slowly cupped between her hands.

When closing time came, Tessa was still at her table. The witch was quiet on her way back, always lagging one or two steps behind me, even after I slowed down to match her pace. After we got to my apartment, I moved a pillow over to the sofa, making it clear that I would give her some space.

"I'm here if you need anything," I said. We were both in our pajamas and I was exhausted. But for all the energy the crisis took out of me, I couldn't imagine the kind of pain Don was in. They had no children, no family to call for support.

"Raul," said Tessa in a sheepish voice.

"What's wrong?"

"Could you… stay with me tonight?"

"If that's what you want," I said. Tessa curled up next to me on the bed. The light brown strands of her hair tickled my nose. I didn't want to let go of her, but I knew that I needed to. What kind of life was one where she felt threatened by the strong emotion of random people walking on the street.

"How is life in the witch colony with your power?"

"It's easier," she said. "Witches don't have much attachment to anything, not even to each other."

So that's it. In that case, Tessa would certainly feel get less attacks. But is that what she wants? I thought about asking her but decided against it.

The next day, the mood at the café was somber. Tessa, Elise, and I tried to work as usual, but it was clear that we were all worried about Julie.

"Do you think she'll be OK?" said Elise, wiping down one of the tables.

"I hope so," I said. Tessa said that Julie was as good as gone, but I wanted to hold out some hope. "She's a fighter."

"I feel bad for Don too," she added. "The old man's grown on me."

The corded phone of the Twisted Cauldron rang out. The relic was installed when the café first opened two decades ago and hadn't been touched since. It was pinned to the wall, just a few feet away from the storage closet door.

"Hello?" I said.

“Hello,” said a soft-spoken voice on the other end. I recognized it as Don’s.

“Hi, Don. How’s everything?”

He took a deep breath.

“Julie’s gone, son. She passed. Doctor said the heart attack was quick. My beautiful Julie left without pain. At least… at least that brings me some closure.”

“I’m so sorry, Don. Everyone here at the café is here for you. Is there anything we could do?”

“The funeral service will be held tomorrow,” said Don. “It would mean the world if you all came.”

“We’ll close up early and be there, Don. You can count on it.”

I wrote down the address and told both Elise and Tessa. Elise responded with an “Oh no”, while Tessa looked away. The witch bit her lip and curled her first into a ball.

“It’ll be tomorrow at 11 AM, so we’ll open 8-10 AM and close for the rest of the day,” I said. “Elise, can you make a sign saying as much?”

“Sure, boss,” she said, heading behind the counter to find the small chalkboard.

“Tessa,” I said, lowering my voice so that Elise couldn’t hear. “Would you be OK going? I told Don we would, but I could understand why you wouldn’t want to.”

“It’s fine,” she said. “Julie was a friend to me too. I’ll go.”

“Do you know what a funeral service is?”

“When they display the body and everyone gives their last wishes, right?” she said.

“That’s more or less it, yeah,” I said.

“I can handle it.”

That day, the mid-afternoon coffee break tasted far too bitter.

Tessa and I met up with Elise just outside the funeral home. It was an enormous estate, with high-rising white walls and a flush of greenery. I wore a black suit, while Tessa and Elise wore black dresses.

“It’s interesting how funeral homes are so pretty,” said Tessa.

“Kind of ironic, really,” said Elise.

“We ready?” I said to both, but looking specifically at Tessa. The people around us were all mourning. I had my doubts that Tessa would

handle it well, but I didn't say anything.

Dozens of guests mingled over the funeral home's marble floors. Most were old men and women that I didn't recognize, but there were some familiar faces. Maria and Alejandra were there, as were the owners of a furniture down the street from the Twisted Cauldron.

"Nice to see you three," said Maria as I approached her, with Tessa and Elise following behind. "It's a shame what happened."

"It really is," I said.

"Did it happen in your shop?" said Alejandra. "I heard some people talking about it."

"It did," said Elise.

"I'm so sorry," said Maria. "Julie was an amazing woman. The smile never faded from her face."

"It didn't," I said. "She was always happy to help. She was actually the first person I ever served coffee to in the Twisted Cauldron."

We visited the room where the open casket was. As we waited in line, I could feel Tessa tense up. She brushed her left hand over her right arm. It was obvious that she was struggling.

The crowd in front of us thinned, until we were face-to-face with the casket.

Lying inside was Julie. She was dressed in a brilliant white gown with lace trims. Seeing her, I was reminded of the conversation I had in Elm Park. There, Julie told me how Tessa had given me purpose. How she filled my empty heart and had me falling for her. It was a little harsh, but necessary. Julie gave me the push I needed to court Tessa. For that, a lifetime of thanks would not be enough.

We step outside of the room and into the main vestibule. Don talked with other mourners, his wooden cane firmly rooted on the ground. When he saw us, his gentle eyes lifted up.

"My boy, thank you for coming," he said.

"I'm sorry for your loss," I said, giving the man a hug.

"We're here for you," said Elise.

"S-sorry for your loss," said Tessa.

"I'm sorry it had to happen in your shop."

"Please don't worry about that," I said.

"You know, I never imagined I would outlive my Julie. She always ate her salads and… God, I miss her so much. Sometimes, I close my eyes

and picture her right there with me. Why wasn't it me? Why was she the one taken away?"

A moment of silence followed.

"Look at me, getting all emotional. I'm sure Julie's having a good laugh at that. She wanted me to give you this," he said, taking out a circular red pin.

"This is…"

Tessa held her hands open, letting the accessory fall on her palms. It looked expensive and hefty.

"Thank you," said Tessa. She admired it for a few seconds before putting it away in her pocket. I didn't understand what was going on, but I assumed that the pin meant something to her.

An old husband and wife pair came to talk to Don.

"We'll leave you to it," I said. The three of us stood in the middle of the vestibule, unsure of what to do next.

"Gonna use the restroom," said Elise.

As soon as Elise left, Tessa tugged at my shirt.

"Everything OK?" I said. Looking at Tessa, however, it was clear that she was struggling. She winced. Her lips quivered, as if speaking a single word was as arduous as walking on a bed of nails.

"I think I'll go home," she said.

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"No, it's fine. Comfort Don any way you can, OK?" she said.

"OK," I said. "I'll send you a text message when I head over."

I handed Tessa the keys to my apartment. She put those in her pocket and took out the ruby pin that Don gave her.

At half-past 5 PM, I sent Tessa a message saying I was on my way back. The funeral home was only a twenty-minute walk from the apartment. I kept checking my phone to see if Tessa would respond, but nothing. She probably went back to sleep.

Climbing up to the hallway of my apartment complex, I noticed something shiny on my door, reflecting the phosphorescent lights hanging from the ceiling. It was only when I was a few feet away that I noticed it was my apartment key.

The door was locked. Already I started getting nervous. Quickly, I unlocked it and peered inside. There was no witch hat inside, nor the witch

herself. No Tessa.

What the hell was happening?

I called Tessa's phone, but it went to voicemail. I called again. Then again. After the fourth call, I gave up trying. I sent her a message asking where she was, then sprinted to the Twisted Cauldron.

Its lights were off. In front of the glass door was the same sign saying we were closing early that day. I pounded on the glass, but no response.

"Tessa," I shouted as I opened the door. No response. The storage closet was empty as well.

Think, Raul. What happened? Did she decide to take an extended stroll through the park? Was she… kidnapped? Then why would the key be in front of my door.

There was one way to find out. I sprinted back to my apartment. I was half-hoping that she would pop up in the middle of my room, exclaiming "Gotcha!" while having a laughing fit. An invisibility spell I didn't know about.

But the room was as empty and sad as it was a few minutes ago. I rummaged through the wardrobe, where Tessa had put most of her things. The spots where she kept her clothes were empty. Inside the closet, empty hangers stood where colorful dresses once were. The place had been scrubbed clean of her.

There was no doubt about it: Tessa had been taken back to the witch colony. I called the only person I knew who could do something about it.

"Uncle Joe?" I said.

"Hey, kid."

"Where is she?"

"Listen, kid. It's, uh… complicated."

"Not that hard, Joe. Where is Tessa?"

"The witches took her back to the colony," he said.

"Wasn't that supposed to happen in a few more weeks?" I said.

"She told you about that? Anyhow, you're right. But the witches noticed she went a little out of control yesterday. That's being generous. She lost it."

"Sealing her off in the colony isn't going to fix anything," I said.

"According to whoever is keeping track of her, Tessa almost died yesterday. Raul, it's for her own good."

“Are you in the witch colony now?” I said.

“I’m not, and even if I was I wouldn’t let you in. Why are you so focused on finding her? You knew she was leaving sooner or later.”

“I thought I had a little more time with her. Uncle Joe, I need to see her.”

“And why’s that?” he said. He made no effort to hide how annoyed he was.

“I love her,” I said. “I love Tessa.”

“God, kid… why did you do this to yourself?”

“What do you mean?”

“You can’t fall for a witch. Nothing good ever comes of it.”

“And what makes you say that?” I said.

“What’s her last name?” he said.

“That’s…”

I froze. I didn’t know what Tessa’s last name was. She never told me but I never bothered to ask.

“You sure you’re in love with her, kid? Or are you in love with the idea of having a girlfriend? There’s a difference. Big difference. You should get out more, Raul. Date other girls in the city. But do yourself a favor and forget about her, alright?”

He ended the call before I had a chance to respond. I felt like such a fool. How could I never ask Tessa her name? I acted as if she meant everything to me, but I didn’t bother to ask such an important detail. Was it that I didn’t care?

On top of the dining room table was a slip of paper I hadn’t noticed before. I sat on my sofa and read it.

“Dear Raul,” it started, “thank you for having me at your home for the last few months. Working with you in the Twisted Cauldron was an enriching experience that taught me a lot about life outside of my home, and for that I am eternally grateful. Thanks for everything, Tessa Karrabine”

I read it over and over a dozen times, repeated her last name until it rolled off my tongue. The first thing that struck me was how impersonal the letter was. In no universe did I imagine someone as bouncy and joyful as Tessa writing something so dry. But maybe that was her way of coping with everything. Either she felt nothing for me, or she tried to convince herself that was the case.

Either way, it tore at me. I let Uncle Joe's words fester in my head, but I couldn't accept them. Tessa was not some bandage I used to soothe my aching heart. I fell for the way she looked at the world, for the way she carried her herself.

And now she was gone for good.

I couldn't hold it in anymore. Tears dripped down my cheek and into the paper. I was such a mess. I needed to think about the future. To focus my attention on improving the Twisted Cauldron experience. I shouldn't spend my time moping. And yet the tears flowed.

The paper in my hands glowed a bright blue. The words in the letter morphed into new ones. Amazed, I read on.

"Hi Raul, I'm sorry for writing this letter in such a roundabout way. The witches took my phone and read the letter, so I had to be sneaky. It was also the only spell I could think of to hide my writing in such short notice. So, if you're reading this, that means you were crying. That's really sweet.

"The truth is, I miss you too. I don't want to leave you behind. In fact, I'd give up on ever returning to my home if it meant I could spend my time with you. Before I came to the Twisted Cauldron, I thought that being a witch meant respecting some ancient creed and studying dusty books. It was not a life I felt fit for me.

"But then you came along and changed my perception. I finally understood that being a witch was about understanding those around you. It meant using your magic to help those around you. You also taught me that you didn't have to use flashy magic to do that. You took care of your little coffee shop and turned it into a place where everyone left with a smile. I saw the way you interacted with others. It wasn't just Elise or myself, but anyone that walked through those doors. You treated them like family, and I'm so grateful that I got to be a part of that.

"I'll take all that kindness you showed me and use it for good. I'll become a witch that you're proud of. My only regret is that you won't be able to see the kind of witch I'll become in the future. Likewise, I won't get to see what kind of magic you do with your café. I hope that you'll find a nice wife one day that will help turn your dreams into a reality. If you make her feel just a tiny bit as happy as you made me, then she would be the luckiest woman alive. Love you, Tessa."

I wiped away the last of my tears. Tessa's love was as clear as day on this letter. She poured her soul into writing this. The paper was light, but

its words carried a heavy burden.

I read the last part again.

“I love you,” I said aloud, reading the line. “I love you too, Tessa.”

In the end, she said it first.

Damn it, Tessa. I have regrets too. You deserve an answer. I could never live with myself if I didn’t at least give you that.

Which is why I went on my phone and bought a one-way airplane ticket to Maryland.

Chapter 12

“Could you run that by me one more time?” said Elise. I called her on my phone minutes before my plane was set to depart at 7 AM.

“Tessa’s rich aunts came and took her away to Maryland. So I’m going there to get her out.”

“OK, but, like… why?”

“She left me this letter where she admitted she loved me, and I can’t let that go unanswered. If I don’t do this, I’ll regret it for the rest of my life,” I said.

“And you want me to look over the café while you’re gone?” she said.

“That’s right. Feel free to open and close at your own pace. Just know that you’ll be the only employee there for a while.”

“For how long?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Haven’t bought a return ticket yet.”

Elise sighed on the other end of the line.

“I better get a raise after all this is over,” she said.

“You will,” I assured her.

I spent the one hour and twenty minutes of the flight thinking about my course of action. According to Tessa, I could get in to the witch colony as long as someone inside wanted me there. I assumed that Tessa’s letter was proof that I would be let in. Even if that was the case, I still needed to find the colony.

She made it seem like it was in a secluded rural area, invisible to outsiders. Blindly searching would take me years, so that was out of the question. Going around asking if anyone has seen some witches might raise questions and put an unnecessary target on my back.

Uncle Joe was the only choice. I would rather try my luck with Maryland’s wildlife...

I stepped foot in Baltimore, finding its morning breeze a few degrees cooler than that of the southern states.

I took a deep breath and dialed.

“What do you want, kid?” said Joe.

“I’m in Baltimore,” I said. “Where are you?”

“You’re what? You crazy, kid? Who’s manning the café?”

“I took care of it,” I said. “Hopefully being here is proof enough that I’m serious.”

“Serious enough to do what? Throw away your life? Yeah, kid, you’re not helping your case much.”

“If you’re not convinced today, that’s fine,” I said. “I’ll rent a room and stay there, calling you every day until you’re convinced.”

“You’ll run out of money. What then?”

“I’ll find a way,” I said. “Maybe offer the Twisted Cauldron at the bank? That could net me a few more weeks of groveling, at least.”

I could hardly believe the words coming out of my mouth. Offering the one place where I really belong as collateral, just so that Joe could tell me where to get started finding a girl.

“You’re an idiot,” he said. “But you win.”

“I—what? It was that easy?”

“If you were willing to offer up the Twisted Cauldron over a girl, who knows what else you’d do. You might end up getting yourself killed. Or worse, get me in trouble.”

“You’ll meet me?” I said.

“Wait in front of the airport. I’ll be there in an hour,” he said, hanging up the call.

That went better than I ever expected it to. I took my duffel bag and waited inside the airport’s franchised coffeeshop. The mocha I ordered reminded me of Tessa and her sweet tooth.

A few months ago, I never would have ordered such a sweet drink. Now, I can’t deny that it’s richness provides a more flavorful alternative to the macchiato. Just another way that the witch changed my life, I guess.

Uncle Joe arrived an hour and a half later than scheduled. I waved to the red sedan that stopped in front of me on the airport curb. It had myriad scratches. Pulling open the door made it swing wildly, as if a little more force would have yanked it free of its hinges.

“Don’t go all Superman on me, kid,” said the man in the driver seat. He was a clean-shaven man with greying hair, cut to resemble a faux-hawk. Aviator sunglasses rested over his narrow nose.

“Sorry about that,” I said. I hadn’t seen him in years. He looked grey and a little on the thin side, but otherwise he was as I remembered him.

“Let’s go back to my place and have a talk,” he said.

“Can I roll the window up?” I said. I held onto the dashboard with both hands, as Joe aggressively weaves through traffic. I tried pressing the button, but the window didn’t rise.

“Doesn’t work,” he said. I sighed. Nothing to do but let the wind slap my cheeks.

“I know how to get inside the colony,” I said. “Tessa told me.”

“Getting in is the easy part, kid. It's what you do once you're inside that counts.”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“There's witches crawling all over the place, kid. powerful witches. They'll know you’re inside the second you step foot through the barrier.”

“And how do you get through? Come to think of it, you've never really explained how you're associated with witches.”

“That's a story for another time, kid.”

When I wasn't fearing for my life, I was appreciating the view from my window. The area around the airport was nothing but flat greenery, stretching as far as the eye can see. back home, putting one foot outside of the airport put you right in the middle of downtown.

I sent Elise a text message, making sure that everything was okay. She responded a few minutes later with “All good! Slow day today.”

After a few minutes of driving on the highway, Uncle Joe made a wild right turn into a parking lot. In front of us was a series of blue and cream-colored apartment buildings, only 4 stories high. the grass was freshly cut and the paint surrounding the buildings had a nice Sheen to it. Was this really where he lived?

“Where are we stopping here?” I said.

“Are you stupid or something, kid? I live here.”

We walked down the clean cement pathway that cut through the complex and stopped in front of first floor door.

The apartment was spotless. Its living room was as big as my entire studio. My eyes turned to the kitchen, hosting a top-of-the-line personal espresso machine. Above it were wooden racks with jars filled to the brim with coffee beans. Each jar had a label that identified the country of origin, including Guatemala, Brazil, and Ethiopia, to name a few.

“How can you afford all this?” I said. I walked over to admire the machine but got hissed at for treading over his rug.

“The rug’s worth more than your apartment,” he said.

“Answer the question, uncle.”

“I do stuff here and there,” he said, putting away his sunglasses. “I manage.”

“Alright,” I said, rubbing my hands together. “How are we doing this?”

“Coffee first,” he said.

“Can I use it?”

“Knock yourself out… just not on the machine, please.”

I ran my hand through the titanium frame. The Distruttore was a stellar espresso machine that carried an even more stellar price tag. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine myself using one.

"You okay there, kid?" He said.

"Sorry, I got a little carried away. Remind me to ask you for more details about these side gigs you talk about."

I used the nearest coffee grounds I could find and brewed us each a single espresso. In a separate container, I added milk and used a battery-operated stirrer to turn it into foam.

"One macchiato," I said.

Uncle Joe drank it all in one gulp. He then brought the cup down onto the granite counter, a big smile spread across his face.

"You've gotten pretty good at making these," he said. "Guess I really did choose wisely."

"You never really explained why you handed the Twisted Cauldron off to me."

"I saw that you are depressed, and I wanted to get it off my hands. Two birds, one stone."

"Still, you put a whole lot of trust in me. For months, I thought you'd come back one day and demand that I give it back to you or say that I was doing something terribly wrong." I said.

"Truth is kid, I wanted to get out of there and fast. If anything, I used you."

"But why?"

"For years, there was something eating me from the inside. When your mother died, I thought it was finally time to make my move."

"Was that when you came here?"

"Yeah, that's right," he said.

“I still don’t get what my mom’s death has to do with anything,” I said.

“Sheesh, you sure like asking questions. Will ya shut up if I tell you where the colony is?”

I nodded. Uncle Joe produced a small map from his pocket. It was folded into a tiny square, with edges yellow from overuse. He spread it over his coffee table.

“We’re here,” he said. “The colony’s a bit peculiar in that its “inside” is static, but the entrance changes location every few months. According to what I know, it’ll move to Backbone Mountain soon, deep into central Appalachian territory. It’ll be pretty much impossible for us to cross inside. Right now, it’s over here by the Washington National Pike.”

He pointed to a random road about 50 miles away.

“How long until it changes location?” I said.

“At midnight, tonight,” he said. “If we let it change locations, it’ll be impossible to get there by car. We’re talking about hours of walking on foot. We might find a few black bears on the way there, too.”

“Tonight?” I said.

“That’s right.”

“No rest for the weary, huh,” I said. I came here knowing it would be hard, but I figured I would have a few days to figure things out. Now I come and it’s all or nothing.

“Getting in is the easy part. If what you’re saying is right, and Tessa is inside wanting you to come in, then you’ll be able to walk through the barrier. Normally, once you’re inside, the guard witches will capture you and take you to the council. There, there’ll be a hearing and the person living inside can vouch for you. Tessa, however, was pretty much taken against her will… so I don’t think your case will go as smoothly. If I had to bet, I’d say that Tessa’s pleas will fall on deaf ears and you’ll be gentled.

I swallowed hard. I had an inkling of what ‘gentled’ meant but I wanted to be sure.

“When you say that, you mean…”

“That they’ll wipe your memories of not only your visit there, but of Tessa. Of course, Tessa’s got a big presence inside that bonehead brain of yours, so removing that might make you permanently stupid. And as soon as they take you back, they’ll hunt down other people that have memories of Tessa.”

The thought of having every memory of Tessa yanked out of me was horrifying. To lose the image of her smile would kill me. Not only that, I would be putting myself and those around me in incredible danger. All to quell my own selfish desires.

"Say that I manage to evade the witches and find Tessa, what then?" I said.

"If you get that far, the next thing will be to make a run for it. As long as record of Tessa is in the library, witches could continue to track her. You need to go there and destroy her record."

"Witches visited my home before. Won't they know to find me there?" I said.

"Ah, kid, don't you see? That's the magic of the records. You destroy that and erase every memory the witches inside have of Tessa."

"That's too much," I said. To rip Tessa away from her home and erase any sign she was ever there would be too cruel. "Besides, what if I get there and she's not interested in doing all that? If I were in her position I would definitely hesitate."

"You're right," he said. "By trying to get out of your own impossible position, you're putting her in one too. She might decide it's not worth it, forcing you to go home empty-handed."

"There has to be a way," I said. "A way to have her be happy without sacrificing everything."

Uncle Joe laughed. It wasn't a chuckle, but a gut-busting row.

"What's so funny?" I said.

"You remind me of myself too much, kid. I fell in love with a witch once."

"You… what? Why mention this now? Can't you help?" I said.

"No can do," he said. "My situation is a little different. I'm afraid I won't be of much help."

I balled my fist, but quickly eased up.

"That's alright. You've done so much for me already, Uncle Joe. I need to do this by myself."

"Heh. Maybe you have grown after all, kid. One day I'll tell you about everything."

We pushed our coffee cups aside and worked out a plan. Tessa, I'm coming for you. And if you'd rather stay back, then that's something I'll have to live with. But I need to know! I need to give her the choice, at least.

We drove to the Washington National Pike after sundown. Uncle Joe stopped next to a large, open meadow. Through the pitch-black night, I managed to catch a glimpse of a dense forest a few hundred yards out.

"Well, this is it," he said. "It's through that forced over there."

"It's a little hard to see, don't you think?"

"Better to go at night when the chances of people finding you are slim. You sure about this? It's not too late to turn back."

"I'm ready," I said. As ready as I'll ever be, at least.

I walked through the meadow, the wet grass crunching under my feet. As soon as I reached the forest, I took out my phone and turned on the flashlight. Uncle Joe said that the entrance to the colony would be located next to a tree with a circle carved into its bark. I walked carefully, making sure that I lit every tree I could find. The last thing I wanted was to miss the midnight deadline because I was too hasty. After 15 minutes of searching, I found the tree. I put one hand into the carved part of the tree, with the other hand holding onto Tessa's letter. This was my one shot.

"I want to see Tessa Karrabine. I want to find the witch that stole my heart, and let her know how I truly feel."

The surrounding trees started to blur. Soon, everything but the tree was surrounded in a brilliant white light. I shut my eyes.

Chapter 13

When I opened them again, I was inside the witch colony. It was as Tessa had described. Stone houses with thatched roots dotted the landscape. Behind them, tall mountains blocked away the outside world. It was crazy to think that just a few moments ago I was a few minutes away from the major highway. I put on the robe that uncle Joe provided me, making sure that the hood covered much of my face.

Flaming torches lit up the night sky, leading me to the city center. There weren't many people around, and the few people that mingled in the town kept to themselves. The men wore the same robe I did, while the woman wore black knee length dresses and which hats that resembled the one Tessa loved so much.

Uncle Joe told me that the best place to look for Tessa would be in the dorms. According to him, those would be on the northeast end of the village. As I traversed the cobbled streets, a man flew out in front of me. He had short-cropped brown hair, and reeked of alcohol.

"Go home Henry," said a large man from an open door. "Come back when you'll stop picking a fight."

The man in front of me struggled up, massaging his back. Seems like witches have bar fights too.

“These bastards... I wasn't lookin' for no fight. Besides, the ale’s trash!”

“If it’s so bad, why d’you keep coming back? Probably because we’re the only pub in town that hasn’t banned your sorry ass.”

“Mr. Karrabine,” said a man a year or two younger than me. He rushed out and handed him a set of keys. “You might need this.”

“Thanks, lad,” said the man. “Make sure you don’t grow up to be a stingy loser like yer dad, alright?”

I couldn’t believe my luck. Mr. Karrabine… Could he be Tessa’s father? He tried to take a step but stumbled, held up only by my own effort.

“Are you alright, sir?”

“Yes, I’m fine, thank you… Who are you?”

Mr. Karrabine looked into my eyes for a few seconds. The witch colony didn’t seem like a particularly big place, so newcomers like myself

must be a rare sight.

"I'm Raul, sir, and I'm here looking for Tessa." I said. Better to be honest and upfront about it.

"Tessa? My daughter?"

"I think so, sir."

"And you're telling me she's back? These good-fer-nothin' witches never tell me a thing. When they shipped her off to the outside, I didn't get so much as a goodbye. Are you from around here? You don't look familiar."

"I'm not," I said. "I manage the café that Tessa worked at while she was outside the witch colony."

"You're an… an… outsider?" he said, staggering back a few steps.

"Don't make such a fuzz!"

"Conspiring with an outsider… If there was ever a reason to cut off my head, this would be it."

"Let me explain, sir." I said. "Tessa came into my life and she changed everything. But then, one thing led to another, and she was taken here against her will. I came here to help her escape… if she wants to."

"Got any proof?" he said. I produced the letter from my pocket and showed him. The man held it close to his face. Even in his drunken stupor, he managed to read and return it to me.

"That definitely sounded like something my Tessa would write. I had no idea. To think that she fell for a man outside of the colony… Way to go, Tessa!"

The man threw his fist in the air and celebrated, shouting 'woo-hoo' over and over again.

"Uh, sir… They might hear us."

"Oh, right," he said. "My bad. It's just that nothing brings a smile to my face more than Tessa stickin' it to the witches. Come with me, kid. I'll make you some tea."

I followed him to his home. It was less a stone house and more a stone hut, barely bigger than my own studio apartment. I tried to ignore the rank smell, but to little effect.

"Make yourself at home," he said. "Want some tea?"

"Sure…" I said. Mr. Karrabine took a wooden stick hanging from his wall and left. He came back a second later with the same stick, one end very much on fire.

"Is that safe?" I said.

“Sure is. I do it every night. Witches ain’t let us use any of the outside world’s machines, so they let us use the fire from streetlights every night.”

He sprinkled leaves into two copper cups.

“Tell me, how did my Tessa fare outside?”

“She was great,” I said. “Adapted faster than I ever could. I think the Twisted Cauldron customers liked her more than me.” Mr. Karrabine laughed, slapping his knees.

“That sounds like her, alright. Tessa has a way of being everyone’s favorite. That’s something she inherited from her mother. Not a day goes by that I don’t miss her.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I said. I had repeated that phrase far too often recently.

“It’s been two decades. Nothing to do about it,” he said, sighing. “Tessa’s power manifested a little later than most other girls, but once she did it baffled all her teachers. A girl who could understand people almost as well as she could understand herself. They were scared of her.”

“Scared? I don’t understand,” I said.

“Good question. There were witches that could burn down the village with a flick of a wrist, and yet they feared an eight-year old kid. She can read people’s feelings, so she can understand who’s guilty and who isn’t better than any witch out there. Tessa can understand if anyone inside is plotting something they shouldn’t. She’s the only girl who can read in a city full of books.”

The full extent of Tessa’s power had never dawned on me. I imagined Tessa could socialize easier because she could understand how the other person felt, but I had no idea she could be used to rat out conspiracies or crack down on criminals. No wonder the council looked for any excuse to bring her home. Which begs the next question: why send her to the Twisted Cauldron in the first place?

“Tea’s ready,” said Mr. Karrabine. He poured the boiling water on the cup, using a spoon to move the leaves inside. I took a small sip and immediately wished I hadn’t. It tasted like dirty water. If I ever served something like this in the café, I would be shut down within a week.

“It’s… good,” I said, putting it down. “Would you mind answering one more question?”

“Go ahead.”

“If Tessa’s so valuable, why was she allowed to go outside?”

“Because of her power, Tessa was given special attention. She was given extra lessons that lasted three, sometimes four hours. That happened every day for years. She lost what little friends she had and came to hate living here. I fought against it, but the council whipped my ass every time. Progress of the community over individual will is how this place runs. She kept her mouth shut, but it was obvious that the whole thing was taking its toll on her. Well, she befriended one of the few outsiders we ever let in here, a Joe—”

“He’s my uncle,” I said.

“Oh, interesting. Yeah, you kinda look like him… Anyhow, Joe visited every few weeks and Tessa never missed a chance to talk to him about life outside this tiny town. Eventually, she asked him to give her a shot at living outside. After rubbing enough elbows, the council allowed it.”

“I had no idea,” I said. “She usually talked pretty positively about life here.”

“That’s Tessa for you. She’s always looking at the bright side. Knowing that, I’m prepared to help you.”

“Are you sure?” I said. Mr. Karrabine’s smile stood out among his sunken face. I saw the gleam in his eyes and knew he would do anything to help her.

“Absolutely. I may not have been the best father, but I can sure as hell give it my all. I’ll do anything for my daughter.”

“There’s the thing. Even if I manage to find Tessa, the witches will always be able to find her. They’ll try to take her again. Which is why Uncle Joe suggested that we—”

“Destroy her record in the library, right?”

“Exactly, sir.”

“It’s not a bad plan,” he said, running his hands through his hair. “The witches will forget she exists, which means that she’ll be able to live her life on her own terms. I’ll forget her, but that’s a small price to pay for my daughter’s happiness. I’ll help out.”

“Sir, feel free to think about it a little more.”

“No, kid. I’ve made up my mind. I haven’t talked to her so I don’t know how she feels about you, but judging from the letter you showed me, she seemed to think you’re the real deal. Let’s go.”

He put on a robe identical to mine, and together we walked through the lit walkways. Most shops had closed for the night, and there were even less people milling about outside than before. Mr. Karrabine led me to a three-story stone building. We were crouched in an alley several buildings away. In front of the dormitory was a witch, standing with her legs spread apart, eyes trolling the horizon.

"How do we get past her?" I said.

"Let me handle that. You make sure to round the corner so she doesn't catch you."

Before I could say anything else, Mr. Karrabine stumbled out. He approached the woman with a drunken slant to his step. I couldn't hear what they were saying, and I didn't have time to care. She walked to meet him, leaving ample space behind her. I left the alley and, staying low, made it to the door. I pushed inside.

The lobby doubled as a dining room. No lights illuminated the room, making it hard to move around. Sneaking into a private women's dorm. Witch or not, this was creepy. But there was no other way.

A door to the right led to an alley. There were a series of doors, each with names. No lights came out from under the doors. By my estimates, it should be around 10 PM. Good thing the witches follow whatever curfew is forced upon them. Otherwise, my job here would be a lot harder.

I scanned the nameplates on the doors one by one, but couldn't find one with a name similar to Tessa's. A staircase at the end of the hall was my only option. I stepped on the first wooden step, cursing at the noise it made.

"Hold it!" I heard a voice say from behind. She carried a lit torch that lit up her face and mine. She was a young woman, tall and with jet-black hair. Her most striking feature were her red-tipped bangs, covering part of her glasses.

"Hello," I said, getting off the step.

"What are you doing here? It's past curfew."

She put her hands to her narrow hips. The woman wore black pants that stopped just below her calves.

"I got lost," I said. "My bad."

"Unlikely. And even if you were, these are the witch-in-training living quarters. If you're caught here, you'll be in for a world of hurt."

"The truth is," I said, "I'm looking for a woman. Tessa Karrabine."

“The emotion-reading witch? Regardless, visiting hours are over.” Her face was like stone.

“I know that, but it’s really important that I talk to her as soon as possible.”

She held out her hand. The air around me became frigid in an instant. A light-blue light shone from her palm.

“As I said, visiting hours are over. If you intend to violate our rules, I’ll freeze you in place.”

Crap, there’s no easy way out of this. And any more talking I do increases the odds of them finding me. There’s no other way, though.

“I’m a human… err, outsider. When Tessa left the colony, she spent that time with me. I fell for her, and she left me this emotional letter… And now I came here to set the record straight.”

“Ugh, you too?” she said, shaking her head. “Everyone inside the colony gushes over how great this witch is. If you ask me, she isn’t so great. She’s far too carefree to be considered a proper witch. Wait! Did you say outside? You’re not from inside this colony? Then how did you get in?”

“I got help from an outsider who frequents this place. My Uncle Joe, he knew the door would change locations by midnight, and so we—”

The witch stretched out her hand even further. The temperature around me dropped rapidly. I tried to run but couldn’t move. My feet were frozen in place. I couldn’t move. This was it. It was all over.

She walked up to me, no doubt to freeze my face until it slid off my neck. All my efforts to come back here were wasted. I should’ve waited, come up with a better plan. I was a fool. And now I would die.

“Did you say Joe?” she said.

“That’s right,” I said. Why did that matter?

The woman turned to face away from me. She put the torch on a hoister by the wall, raised her hand to her temple.

“There’s only one Joe that would know how to get in. One with gaudy sunglasses and a loathsome sense of self-confidence?”

“Do you know him?” I said.

“Yes,” she said, turning to face me. “He’s my father.”

Chapter 14

“Come again?” I said. “He’s your father?”

“And that would make you my cousin, right?” she said. There was so much wrong with this picture. I didn’t have time for this right now. I’d ask Joe all the hard questions later. Right now…

“Could you please call off your spell? I’m starting to lose feeling in my legs,” I said.

“Right, sorry.” She waved her hand, making the ice disappear. I stretched them out. It had only been for a few minutes, but I was glad to move around again. Witches and their power continue to impress me.

“Now you have my attention. Explain to me why my father would go to such lengths to help you. His character is quite binary. He either cares very much for something, or he doesn’t care at all. He must’ve been pretty convinced.”

Any attempts to escape from my part would likely end with me freezing over. I explained my situation to her as quickly as I could, but I avoided telling her about Tessa’s record in the library. She nodded the whole time.

“Interesting,” she said. “So, you fall for this girl and now you want to set the record straight. I must say, though, that coming all the way over here and risking your life. You’re either remarkably brave or remarkably stupid.”

“Neither, actually,” I said. “Ever since I discovered the letter I’ve been running on some sort of high. I don’t think it’s hit me yet, how far I’ve come.”

“Very well, then. The least I could do is take you to Tessa’s room. But we better hurry. The other witches could be here any minute.”

“Mind asking for your name?” I said. “I’m Raul.”

“Call me Luna,” she said.

We went up two flights of stairs to arrive in front of Tessa’s room. I froze reading the nameplate. This is what I came here to do, and yet I was so scared. What if she refused to leave? It was a very real possibility, and I would be forced to walk away and go back home. My last memory of Tessa wouldn’t be the letter, but of her rejecting me. It was a hard pill to swallow.

Still, I had to try. I took a deep breath and knocked.

“Who is it?” said Tessa, rubbing her eyes.

Tessa was here, in the flesh. She had her pajamas on. It had been little more than 24 hours, and yet it felt like I last saw her months ago.

“Tessa…”

“Raul!? Is it really you?”

I nodded.

“I came back for you. I know it might seem like I’m imposing, but __”

Tessa jumped at me and put her lips to mine. I heard Luna gasp loudly, but I didn’t care. To hold Tessa again and kiss her was amazing, even if it was just one more time.

“You talk too much,” she said.

“Yeah, I do. Listen, I came here to get you back.”

“What do you mean, Raul?”

“Uncle Joe helped me get in, then I met your father and he helped me get here, and then I found out Luna is my cousin and she helped me find your room. Now I’m here to ask if you’d be interested in leaving with me.”

“H-Hold on a second! My father helped you?” she said. “You might need to explain this a little more.”

“ATTENTION EVERYONE, AN OUTSIDER HAS BREACHED OUR COLONY. WE HAVE REASONS TO BELIEVE THEY MAY BE DANGEROUS.”

The booming voice resonated off the walls.

“They’ll be here any second,” said Luna.

“There’s not much time,” I said. “Listen, Tessa. If you decide to go with me, the witches can still come and try to take you back against your will. That means that we’d need to destroy your book in the library.”

“What?” said Luna. “That would be unthinkable! A far worse crime than breaking in.”

“Does my father know?” said Tessa.

“Yes. Knowing that, he helped me get this far.”

“It’s a big risk,” said Tessa. “I’d be leaving everything behind, including my teachers and whatever friends I’ve made along the way. I would be alone as a witch, continuing my training on my own. Not even my own father would remember I exist.”

“Exactly,” said Luna. “It’s crazy. You’re better off staying—”

“I’m not done,” said Tessa. “It’s crazy, but it’s what I want. The alternative is to stay here and rot. I could pretend everything is alright, but I’d be no different from a prisoner. I can’t stay here any longer, Luna.”

Tessa took my hand and squeezed it.

“Let’s do this,” she said. There was a fire burning in her eyes. It was bright and beautiful, a look that threatened to swallow everything in its path. It was the look of the most determined witch.

“Before that,” I said, putting my hand on her hip and edging her closer to me. “I love you, Tessa.”

“Me too,” she said. We smiled and shared a quick kiss.

“You two are crazy,” said Luna. “But I’m intrigued. Allow me to accompany you.”

“There’s not much time,” I said. “Let’s go.”

“Wait! Let me get dressed,” said Tessa. She came out with the same white blouse and purple skirt I saw her wear so much, along with her hat and Julie’s gift pinned to her chest.

Luna led us out of a back entrance. The three of us pulled on our robes and walked briskly through the outskirts of the town. The message had worked; dozens of townsfolk took up torches and ran through the middle of the town. The night provided us some cover, but it wouldn’t be long until we were found.

“We’re here,” said Luna. She stopped in front of an unassuming stone structure. It wasn’t unlike any of the other buildings in the colony.

The inside had shelves that extended into the ceiling, each one filled to the brim with books.

“Where do we start looking?” I said.

“Not here,” said Luna. “What we want is in the basement.”

Luna put her hand to the floor. A trap door appeared with a circular bronze handle.

“Thanks for all your help, Luna,” said Tessa. “We can take it from here. I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

“Raul is in league with my father. I can’t just sit idly by…”

“Then let’s hurry down,” I said. I grabbed onto the handle and pulled it with all my strength. After prying it open, I held it open as the two girls descended the stairs.

The basement was pitch black. Luna summoned a small fireball, illuminating a few feet around us. She held it up and I caught a glimpse of

hundreds, maybe thousands, of shelves.

"The 'T' section should be near the back," said Tessa. We passed by so many identical-looking shelves that for a second, I thought we were stuck in some sort of loop.

"Are these the records of all the witches in the colony?" I said.

"Every person who was born inside the colony since its inception 500 years ago has a book. Access to this place is forbidden," said Luna, lowering the tone of her voice.

"Then why is security so lax?" I said.

"Because it's unthinkable for anyone to come here in the first place," she said. "An encyclopedic understanding of the lives of every member of the colony, recorded automatically… do you understand why we need something like this, Raul?"

"I don't," I said.

"After 500 years, our kind has yet to integrate with the rest of the world. We've been a colony for half a millennium. Witches are powerful beings, but we can't defend themselves when there's so many more people out there. Our ancestors knew that we our colony could be destroyed any second, so they developed spells that would record the information, in the hopes that those who survive could protect this and use the knowledge of past generations to rebuild."

"I had no idea…"

"And we're heading to destroy one of those records right now," said Tessa.

"Is that really alright?" I said.

We kept our fast pace down the line of shelves. Whenever a new letter started, the first shelf of that letter had the same letter in big letters. After a few minute of walking, we were barely past 'M'.

"It is," said Tessa. "Fear of the future is what created this library, but it's also what got us into this in the first place. A place with no connection to the rest of the world might as well not exist," said Tessa.

"Those are strong words," said Luna.

"Our memory… what we pass on to future generations is a product of the people we interact with. Hiding here isn't going to make things better! If we want to progress as witches, then we need to share with the rest of the world."

“I had never thought of it like that,” said Luna. “I see your point. To be honest, I find some of our witch ways antiquated. But, even so…”

“This is the aisle,” said Tessa. We slipped inside, carefully checking the name on the spine of each book. We were a few minutes away from ending this thing. I could picture ourselves back in the Twisted Cauldron, as happy as ever.

“Teana’s here,” said Tessa. “We’re close.”

“Is this what you’re looking for?” said a high-pitched voice. Luna’s flame illuminated the space in front of us, revealing an aging witch. The black hair made her snow-like complexion stand out even more. Nestled under her arm was Tessa’s volume.

Were we too late? No, there was still a chance we could grab it from her. I looked back to find both Tessa and Luna with their mouths ajar.

“What’s wrong?” I said.

“That’s Minerva, the Lionhearted,” said Tessa.

“The most powerful witch in the colony,” said Luna, “and my mother.”

“Your little adventure ends now, children,” she said. Purple orbs flickered over her head.

“What do we do?” I said.

“We run,” said Tessa. “Let’s go!”

We turned the other way, but three more witches appeared and blocked our escape. The next thing I knew, my face hit the stone floor.

When I came to, I was in a dark room strapped to a chair.

“What the…?”

Luna and Tessa were next to me, also bound. Their eyes flickered open, and they quickly found themselves asking the same questions I was asking. Behind us was Mr. Karrabine and, shockingly, Uncle Joe himself.

“Uncle Joe! How did they get you?”

“Silence!” said Minerva. Surrounding us was a circular table. Thirteen pointy-haired witches sat in them, Minerva included. The room was too dark to make out any details, but I got the feeling they were none too pleased to see us there.

“The five of you have made a mockery of our community. Never in my entire time as Head Councilwoman have we had a night as disastrous as this one. To you, Karrabine, you have been a drunken fool for a long time,

but a criminal you were not. Assisting in this embarrassment… people have been executed for less."

"Yes, Councilwoman. I'm sorry," he said, bowing his head. His face had blotches of blood on it.

"Please leave my father out of this," said Tessa. "He only tried to help me."

"Silence, young one! You will get your turn in due time. Now, Joe… It's painfully obvious that you were the one who guided this boy here. You're in a quite privileged position, and I admit that our prior engagements may have clouded my vision. That will no longer the case. Consider yourself lucky if you leave the colony alive."

Uncle Joe sat in the back, biting his lip.

"Do whatever you want to me," he started, "but please don't do anything to my nephew or our daughter."

"Father…"

"Now, to the three of you. First, Luna. Assisting an outsider in committing crimes that undermine the very foundation of witchhood. You were shaping up to be a spectacular witch, but behavior like this is beyond reproachable. Forget about doing magic again. You should be cleaning pots and pans for the rest of your life."

"Mother, if you would only listen to my reasons," said Luna.

"Mother? I renounced that title the second you were born, Luna. You are a citizen of this colony no different than any other. Raul, Joe and I had an arrangement where Tessa would work next to you in the hopes of getting a taste of this 'freedom' that she desperately desired. We hoped that by caving to her desires, she may be better able to control her power. It became increasingly clear that this was not the case. The girl's breakdowns were so severe that the witch we had monitoring her nearly had a meltdown of her own. So, we brought her back. Had you not had the audacity to claw your way into something that doesn't concern you, then all of this might've been averted. Feel the weight of the consequence of your actions."

"Please, let me explain myself," I said. She was right. Every word was right. I was an idiot for trying to push myself in here. I did it, and now everyone will pay because of my mistake.

"Fine," said Minerva, crossing her hands. "Only because I am interested in knowing what led you to make such a horrid decision, so I can be sure it never happens again."

“A few years ago, my mother passed away. That led me to drop out of grad school and end up hopelessly depressed. Then, Uncle Joe ceded control of his coffee shop to me. I was bad at first, but with a little effort I managed to make a place that customers could relax and be happy. The whole time, though, I was missing something. I told myself that I wanted to make the Twisted Cauldron the best café it could be, but that was just an empty goal. There was no meaning behind my words.

“Then Tessa came along. At first, I thought it was a little weird for my uncle to drop someone off like that, but not entirely out of the question. Soon I discovered that she was a witch. I was a little confused, but in time I grew to love her. Her smile taught me to forget everything and live for the moment. Tessa knew some crazy powerful magic, but the most magical thing she ever did didn’t have anything to do with magic. She was like a shining star saying, ‘Shine with me or get left in the darkness!’ I’d like to think that I also helped her come to terms with this new world she was a part of. In that sense, I think her visit outside the colony was a success! She might not be able to control her powers much better, but she’s a citizen of the world now, not just of this colony. She’s interacted with so many people in her time in the Twisted Cauldron. She’s made so many of them happy. To rip her out of their lives would be wrong.”

When I finished, I was gasping for breath. That was it. My last defense. A desperate plea.

“Are you done?” said Minerva.

“Wait, please let me talk as well,” said Tessa.

“I think we’ve heard enough for now,” she said. “Now the council will deliberate.”

“Before that, Minerva, I think there’s someone here who hasn’t been given a fair shot at speaking her mind,” said Joe.

“Very well. Tessa, you may speak your case.”

“Thank you, Head Councilwoman,” she said, bowing her head. “Everyone, I recognize that my time in the human world caused me a great deal of pain. That doesn’t mean that hiding in here is the correct thing to do! As I lived my life outside, one thing became especially clear: these people live a fuller life. They attach themselves to the world around them. Their neighbor’s pain is their own. This leads to more heartache, but it’s a speck in the face of all the joy a connected life brings. I would train day and night to get my power under control if it meant I got to experience that again.

“The witch colony is amazing, with hundreds of years of history. I know I’m connected to a wonderful past, and I’ll never forget that. However, I think it’s time we start looking outside the colony. Can you imagine what kind of progress we can make if we take outside ideals and incorporate them as our own? Please, High Councilwoman, I ask this not only for my own selfish desires, but for the betterment of witchkind.”

Minerva spent a few arduous seconds staring at Tessa. For her part, Tessa didn’t so much as blink. Standing up to someone as powerful as her couldn’t have been easy.

Minerva snapped her fingers. We were immediately transported to an empty room, lit by torches perched on the walls. Our bindings came undone, and we were free to walk the room. There was one door, but none of us had any hope that it would be unlocked.

“Dad,” said Tessa as she ran over to hug her father. “Did the witches hurt you?”

“I had it coming,” said Mr. Karrabine, laughing. “Nothing a little nap won’t fix. Your boyfriend here saw me and, well, once I saw that letter, I couldn’t say no.”

“What letter?” said Tessa. “H-He showed you the letter?”

“Me too,” said Uncle Joe. “It was thoughtful.”

“Raul!” said Tessa, stomping her feet. “How could you? That was so personal.”

“I mean, it worked, didn’t it?” I said. “Not that it matters now.”

“You tried, though,” she said, putting her hand on my cheek. “Sometimes, we can try as hard as we want and it’s never enough.”

Tessa turned back to her father.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you I was back,” said Tessa. “I was confused and wanted to give it a little more time before I saw you. Despite what everyone says, I know you’re a good man at heart, father.”

“Tessa, it’s me who should be apologizing. When we lost your mother, I was wrecked. I promised myself I would spend double the effort to raise you. But then the witches discovered your power and they snatched you away. I knew you weren’t happy, but I was powerless to change it. It ripped me up. But now I know better. I shouldn’t have let myself fall like that. I’ll be a better man. For the both of us.”

“Oh, father…”

“Touching reunion,” said Uncle Joe. He sat with his arms crossed.

“Hey Joe, why didn’t you tell me that you had a daughter named Luna? Or a wife? Hell of a thing to hide from your nephew.”

“Not wife, kid,” said Uncle Joe, wagging his finger. “So what? You never asked.”

He made me want to tear my hair out. Still, there was no denying that he came here to help me. I shouldn’t be too hard on him.

The door swung open, hitting the wall with a thunderous clank. Minerva appeared out of it, wearing an expression that was halfway between anger and disgust.

“The Council has decided,” she said. “On the matter of allowing Tessa to leave the witch colony, the council voted 7-6 in favor of Tessa.”

It really happened. I couldn’t believe it. Tessa’s pleas worked. My god… I’ve never been so happy in my life.

“However, Tessa must abide by certain requirements. Before she leaves, we will instruct her on training she can do to keep her powers in check. She must return to the colony every two months, so we can assess her progress. If we see that Tessa is not taking her studies seriously, then we will revoke her permissions.

“As for Mr. Karrabine, we will not pursue punishment. The council recognizes that he was put in a difficult position. Any further violation of our community rules, however, will be met with strict punishment.

“Raul, your actions were done in good faith, but they undermined the very core of our colony. The next time you wish to come, you must be accompanied by Tessa. No exceptions.

“Luna, your actions were deplorable. However, they showed a healthy amount of initiative that the council commends. As such, we will hold off on punishing you for now.

“Lastly… you.”

Minerva furrowed her brow. Her eyes were like guns, zeroed in on Uncle Joe.

“I’m not going to like this, aren’t I?” he said.

“Your behavior today put the colony itself at risk. I’m afraid that the council voted 12-1 in favor of rescinding your rights to enter the colony.”

“Can I come and go with another witch?” he said.

“You cannot,” said Minerva. For the first time, her voice wavered. “You are banned from entering this witch colony. Period.”

Uncle Joe clicked his teeth. I had no idea what other relationship he had with the colony, but the ruling was hard on him. Considering all the secrets he had kept until tonight, it wouldn't surprise me if he had more family here.

"Now that everything has been settled, we will be sending you back where you belong. It has been a long night, and we all need our rest."

A green hue surrounded Minerva. Just as she was about to cast, Luna shot up from her seat.

"E-Excuse me, Head Councilwoman!"

"Speak," said Minerva.

"After hearing Tessa, I can't help but feel that my witch training would be enhanced if I stayed in the outside world."

"Does your host agree?"

Minerva looked at me. Her eyes had a softer look to them, but I think that was a side-effect of her tiredness more than anything.

To have Luna living with us inside the studio apartment would be ridiculous. Not only is she my cousin (half-cousin?), but there's simply not enough room for the three of us. I certainly can't afford to pay for a second apartment.

"Me? I, uh, sure," I said. "There's just one thing. Would it be possible for them to receive a stipend? With my current income, I can't afford to pay for their housing, even if they get jobs at the Twisted Cauldron."

"Very well," she said. "We will provide both women with a stipend from our coffers."

Was it gold? Or maybe they knew a spell that could print US dollar bills.

"If that is all, please leave me alone," said Minerva. She snapped her fingers. My vision was overtaken with a green hue. I swirled in and out of consciousness. When I came to, I was in the middle of the forest.

"We're back?" I said. Uncle Joe helped me up.

"With an hour to spare. Good job, kid."

"Where's Tessa and Luna?"

"They were probably sent back to their rooms to get their stuff ready," he said.

"So we wait here?" I said. The tree with a circle carved out of the trunk was a foot away.

“Yup.”

“I’m sorry about everything that happened,” I said.

“What are you apologizing for? You got Tessa back and you even managed to get Luna to come on board. I’d say the Twisted Cauldron is going to be a very lively place.”

“I’m happy for that,” I said. “But I’m referring to you. You lost access to the colony.”

“It was bound to happen eventually,” he said. “I’m not too good with rules.”

“Was the colony important to you, uncle?”

“Kid, it was the most important place in the world for me. That’s why I moved here. It’s thanks to you that I was able to leave the coffee shop behind and come here. Thank you, kid. It wasn’t for long, but I was able to spend time here because of that.”

Epilogue

“I still don’t get it,” said Luna. She had been asking questions constantly during our 10-hour drive down south. I was in the front passenger seat and managed to tune her out occasionally, but Tessa wasn’t so lucky. She had to contend with being only a few inches apart from Luna, forced to listen to the nonstop barrage.

“Coffee has caffeine,” said Tessa.

“But so does tea,” said Luna. “What’s the difference?”

“Coffee comes from beans, I guess,” said Tessa. “You’re getting annoying, Luna!”

“Excuse me for asking so many questions! I would think it prudent to understand as much as I can about coffee before I start working at a café.”

“We’re here,” said a raspy-voiced Joe. He dropped us off in front of the Twisted Cauldron.

“Do you want to stay with us?” I said. “I could use your guidance.”

“No thanks, kid. I think I’ll go back and figure some stuff out. I’ll be sure to keep in touch some more.”

With that, he was off.

I turned to stare at the Twisted Cauldron. It was a quaint coffee shop, with purple trimmings surrounding the door. Through the window I could see a dozen customers, each enjoying their own cup of coffee.

I helped Tessa and Luna roll their suitcases inside. Elise heard the bell and acted out of instinct.

“Hello, and welcome to—oh my god, you’re back!”

Elise ran up to give Tessa and myself a hug, her curly hair disheveled.

“Things have been crazy these last two days,” she said. “Who’s this?”

“Hello, I’m Luna,” she said. “I’m another wit—”

Tessa and I moved to cover the tall girl’s mouth. She swatted them away and cleared her throat.

“I’m, uh, Raul’s cousin. I’ll be working here from now on.”

“Good,” said Elise. “Nice to meet you. Well then, I’ll see you all in a few days!”

Elise threw the apron to me and rushed out the door with a bounce to her step.

“Seems like we’ll need to start working now,” said Tessa.

“Do we not get to put our stuff away first?” said Luna.

“Seems like today’s too busy. Don’t worry, we’ll teach you as we go,” I said. I sent Luna to the storage closet to retrieve an apron for herself. I tried to follow her, but Tessa held onto my hand.

“Something wrong?” I said.

She looked at me and shook her head.

“No,” she said. The witch planted a kiss on my lips. I closed my eyes to embrace it. It was short, but so, so sweet.

“Things are about to get hectic,” I said.

“With you by my side, I can handle anything.”

Author Notes

A Witch's Guide to a Good Brew has been on my mind for some time. I don't remember how the idea of a witch coming to work at a coffeeshop came from, but I'm certain it started after I read a book on espresso in summer 2017. Coffee drinking has been a big part of my life for quite some time, and I wanted to capture some of its mysticism.

A Witch's Guide is my second published book but, unlike my first book *Flame Over Empire*, it was written with the intention of publishing on Amazon from the start. I had a lot of crazy ideas in mind, but ultimately, I felt that telling a more focused story was best. Writing this story was an adventure, and I hope you readers enjoyed it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

I set up a website (http://www.joserc.com/) where I plan on posting updates on the writing process and anything else that comes to mind.

I've grown fond of the Twisted Cauldron and look forward to exploring the world and its characters again soon. Look forward to a follow-up to A Witch's Guide to a Good Brew soon!